


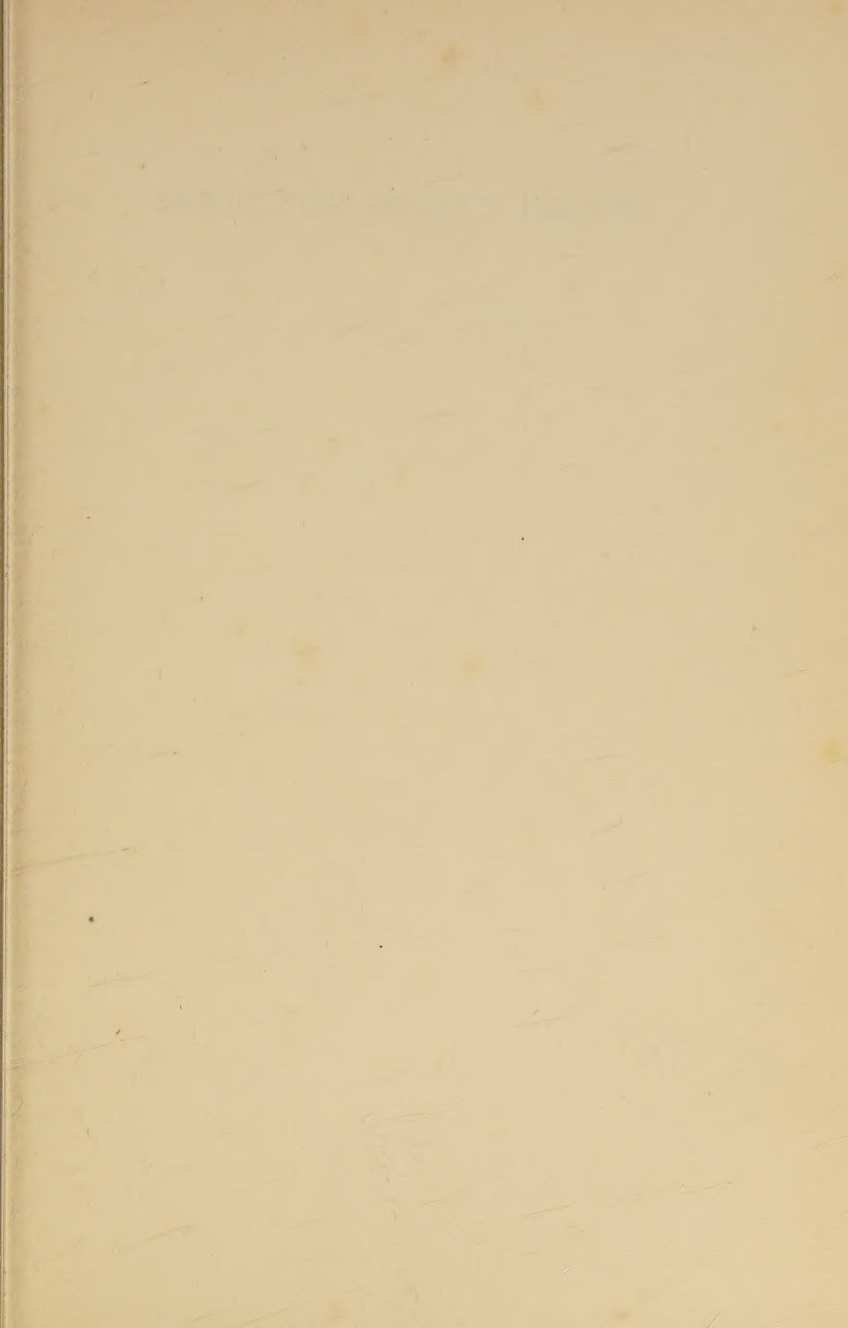


INSPECTOR FROST'S JIGSAW



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H. Maynard Smith

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PART ONE

Tuesday, September 22nd, 1924

CHAPTER I

8 A.M.—10 A.M.

"A WELL-TO-DO widow named Mrs. de Morville, of The Elms, Aldersford, was shot on her own lawn yesterday afternoon," said the Chief. "The local police say that it is impossible to discover who did it or why."

"Then perhaps it was an accident," said I.

"It couldn't have been—at least, that is what the local police say. So you had better go there and discover the criminal."

"I can't do the impossible all on my own. Can I have young Detective Smith, who was with me in the Brighton Bank robbery case? I know he is free."

"Hadn't you better first find out if you want him?"

"No! But I'll send him back at once if I don't."

"All right," said the Chief. "I will see that he is sent up to your room for instructions."

When I undertake an inquiry in a small place where you can't be hid, I like to arrive as Inspector Frost of the C.I.D., for I generally find it ensures me the consideration due to my position, and that my work is facilitated by my being known. I have no belief in the disguised and masquerading detectives of fiction—besides, being fifty, weighing fifteen stone, wearing a close-cropped beard, and having a cast—a very slight one—in one eye, I am not an easy man to disguise. It is different with my subordinate. He has no position to maintain, and he is much more likely to be useful if he is not in the

limelight. Again, it is not to be expected that a man in my position should shadow a criminal himself, or lie out all night in a damp ditch, or run after an armed burglar across a ploughed field. I have done such things in my youth, but now Billy Smith does them for me—a good lad who three years ago was a Silver Wolf among Scouts, and had more badges than he could tack on his sleeve.

Perhaps I ought to confess that Billy is my godson; and, since my own boy was killed in the Great War, I have concentrated on his advancement. I hope he will some day be one of the Big Five—an eminence I shall not reach because of my age. But then, I started as a village constable with no one to back me; Billy starts at the centre with my fifteen stone behind him.

When he left his Council School at the age of fourteen, he obtained a job with that eminently respectable and very important firm of Barrington and Sinclair in Lincoln's Inn Fields. He told me that he meant to be Lord High Chancellor, for even at fourteen he had a very good conceit of himself. So he ran errands with such dispatch, and delivered messages with such crisp exactitude, that he was soon promoted to an office stool. For three years he polished that stool at the expense of three pairs of trousers. It took him all that time to discover that in such a very important firm he might as well hope for the gift of the moon as for the gift of his articles. When he tumbled to it he tumbled off the stool and came to me, and I worked him into Scotland Yard. He was at the time terribly disappointed, especially with Barrington and Sinclair for being so short-sighted; but I assured him that I had myself arrested more than one eminent solicitor, and that for my part I thought it more useful to detect criminals than to defend them. Hitherto, Billy has made good. I am glad to have him with me in this murder case, and I planned the rôle he was to play before he knocked at my door.

"Billy," I said, "you will have read in the papers

about the de Morville murder, and, thanks to my influence with the Chief, you have been specially selected to assist me in discovering the murderer. It is a great honour for you. What are you to do? Well, you are to put on your overalls and ride that motor-bike of yours to Aldersford in Blankshire. It is seventy miles. You can put up at the 'Rose and Crown'. A local guide-book says it is a high-class family and commercial hotel with special accommodation for motorists and tourists. Moderate charges. An excellent centre for visiting the many places of historic and architectural interest in the neighbourhood!

"Who are you to be? Why, William Smith, of course. When you are blessed with names like that you need never adopt an alias. Remember, Billy, it is a golden rule: If you want to deceive people, don't deviate from the truth further than is necessary.

"What are you to be? Well, you might think of yourself as William Smith, articled clerk to Williamson and Evans of Southampton Row. It would be a rash man who betted there was no such firm. Of course, you won't talk of your position more than an articled clerk on a holiday would. I think you can play the part of your frustrated ambition all right.

"It's more difficult to explain why an articled clerk should waste his short holiday at a one-horse place like Aldersford. I have it! You are literary and artistic. You have a passion for places of historic and architectural interest. Blankshire, says the guide-book, is famed for its early English churches. You adore Early English. Don't interrupt me. Detective Smith may be a Philistine. That's what you are, Billy, a Philistine—but there is nothing in the nature of things why an articled clerk shouldn't be cultured. Wasn't David Copperfield an articled clerk or something like it? There now, you have some three hours before you need start. Time enough to mug up a guide-book and read something about Early English. And don't you despise the opportunities I provide for remedying the defects of

your education. One word more: remember, Billy, that an articulated clerk on a holiday, who chooses a high-class hotel where the charges are moderate, will not be too lavish in his expenditure. You'll have all reasonable expenses allowed, and a little over—but never forget, it's not your money—it's Government money, Billy!

"Now, off you go, and buy me the Ordnance Survey sheet of Aldersford on the largest scale—I have a guide-book to Blankshire, but I should like the *Highways and Byways* volume. You ought to breathe the romance of a county, if you want to know why it breeds murderers. You can buy for yourself the local Guide and a text-book on architecture. Don't be disheartened. Nobody, not even the village antiquary, will expect an articulated clerk to know much. They'll believe in you the more if you agree with them and are ready to listen.

"Oh, yes! I was forgetting. You will arrive at Aldersford about four o'clock, for that is the dead hour in a country town when nobody is about. You will take a room, have tea, and ask your way to the church. I hope you will find it interesting. After that you may hang about and talk to anyone in the bar or coffee-room, and ask questions about the best way to get to places of historic interest. Don't be inquisitive about the de Morville murder, but don't forget anything you are told or may overhear. Lastly, don't you start on a line of your own, or there will be another murder in Aldersford, and I shall be hanged for it!"

You needn't think of the above as a monologue. Billy dutifully punctuated it with remarks that are not worth recording. He then went out and bought the right sheet of the Ordnance Survey—bright boy! He also obtained the *Highways* volume second-hand—a very bright boy! Meantime, I had packed my suit-cases and changed my clothes. I put away the subfusc garments usual in the Yard and proper to Lavender Gardens, Brixton, where I live, and clad

myself, like a sporting farmer on market days, in clothes that were conspicuous and had pockets. This was not to disguise myself. My taste in dress was formed when, as a small boy, I helped my father to drive sheep to a country town. I was going to such a town, I was going to stay at an inn, and I wanted to be noticed. For once I could consult my own taste without disgracing my wife and daughters, who are real ladies and dreadfully anxious lest father should be vulgar—God bless them, poor dears, I can't help it.

CHAPTER II

10 A.M.—1.10 P.M.

I CAUGHT the ten o'clock express at Waterloo, and spent the two hours' journey very profitably by myself in a first-class railway carriage. For the first half-hour I studied the topography of Aldersford from the Ordnance Survey, until I felt that it was photographed on my brain. I then read about the Highways and Byways of Blankshire—a fascinating volume full of pictures and romance. Blankshire in the course of ten centuries has apparently produced some notable murderers, but never a detective. The historical mysteries, I felt sure, could have been easily solved if only the most incompetent man from the Yard had been upon the spot. I speculated on how I should have investigated some of them, but I left the de Morville mystery alone. It is a great mistake to form a theory before you know the facts.

On arriving at Aldersford I told the porter to put my bags in the bus of the "Rose and Crown". I then asked my way to the police station, and let him know that I was Inspector Frost from Scotland Yard. He suggested that the bus could drop me there, but I preferred to walk, and before I went out into the Station road everyone knew who I was. A small boy, who had hoped in vain to carry a commercial traveller's bag, padded on before me telling the news, and the bus man pulled up a little down the street to point me out with his whip to a friend. I chuckled at the thought of how useful the unsuspected Billy Smith was likely to be during the inquiry.

Station Road was broad, new, and uninteresting.

It was also short. It led to the High Street, which was broad, long, and ancient. There was no other street, only a few back lanes and some courts. I went down two of them in order that I might gauge their degree of dilapidation and scent their criminal possibilities. Each time I emerged there were two or three curious loafers. The news was spreading rapidly—"the London 'tec had arrived".

The police station was on the right-hand side near the centre of the town, and from it I could see the "Rose and Crown" fifty yards up on the other side of the street. I asked a policeman at the door if the Super was in, and a minute afterwards was ushered into his presence.

Superintendent Thomas was a well set-up man of middle age, with a grey tooth-brush moustache and well-shaved florid cheeks. From a sense of dignity he was a little stiff in his movements, and he had an eye which betokened command.

I knew at once that he was a good man at his job, an organizer and a disciplinarian, and that his job was not the same as mine, which implies no criticism of his efficiency. Mysterious crimes do not often happen in the district round Aldersford.

"Well," I asked, "what have you discovered?"

"Nothing," he replied, "but the footprints from the drive in among the Portugal laurels. There are footprints of more than one man."

"If there were two engaged in the murder, it should not be hard to discover them."

"I don't believe the footsteps have anything to do with the crime, myself, but you must judge that for yourself. I would rather say no more at the moment."

"Quite right! I like to see things for myself and form my own conclusions. Then I like to have them checked by someone who has local experience. What I say is, that given a trained detective and a sensible local man to keep him from wasting his time up side tracks, everything can be discovered."

"Well, I don't think you will discover who

murdered Mrs. de Morville. Anything more inexplicable I never heard of."

"You will see. Just tell me the facts."

He did so, and this is my *précis* of them:

Mrs. de Morville, aged fifty-five, was the widow of the Rector of Badenharn. On the death of her husband twelve years ago she had rented The Elms, the dower house of the Gerrans family, and had lived there ever since with an unmarried sister, Miss Courtland. She was reputed to have an income of about £3,000 a year, and was undoubtedly the leading lady in Aldersford since Lady Gerrans died. She was a magistrate, a guardian, a school manager, and also largely managed the parish, for the Super explained "the Vicar's wife has babies and no servant".

After lunch on the previous afternoon, Miss Courtland had gone upstairs to lie down, and Mrs. de Morville had worked in the garden. She met the postman at about three-forty-five in the drive, and took the letters. At four, she rang the bell in her work-room, and gave the parlourmaid a note to be sent up to the Manor House, and ordered tea in the garden. At four-twenty the parlourmaid brought out the tea-table and placed it near the cedar tree. At that time Mrs. de Morville was seated in a wicker chair knitting. When the parlourmaid returned ten minutes later, Mrs. de Morville was lying face downwards on the grass about four yards from the chair—dead, with a wound between her temples. The parlourmaid and other servants, as soon as they were assured that Mrs. de Morville was dead, carried her upstairs, and rang up the police, who were on the spot within five minutes. A diligent search had been at once instituted for any suspicious persons, and all the stations in the county had been warned of the murder. A thorough search had been made of the house and garden, and except for the footprints in the shrubbery nothing had been discovered. The doctor had made an examination of the body and had found the little nickel bullet in the base of the skull.

"There," concluded the Super, "is the bullet. It is the sort that might have been fired from a small-bore rifle or from a pistol. The doctor, who does not pretend to be a specialist, is sure that it was not fired at short range."

"Is the doctor's opinion worth considering?"

"Well, he was in Flanders during the War and received an M.C."

"Why did they move the body before you arrived?"

"Don't know, but I guess it was a natural thing to do—to carry her up and lay her on the bed."

"Is the time certain?"

"The parlourmaid says she noted that the clock in the hall was exactly four-thirty as she passed with the tray. Mrs. de Morville insisted on punctuality. I noted the clock and found it was correct with my watch. It was four-forty-two when we received the message over the phone, and my run-about was at the door. I jumped in with Sergeant Johnson, and a constable off duty followed as quickly as possible."

"Well, there are the facts, and now you must put me wise about the people. We will begin with Mrs. de Morville. I assume that nothing is known about any mystery in her past, or about her having any undesirable relatives?"

"Nothing."

"And who benefits by her death?"

"I don't know, but I have been told that she only had the money for life, and that it all goes to charities, but Miss Courtland will tell you, and I am sure she will help you in every way."

"I suppose Mrs. de Morville was very popular?"

"No, I should not say that. She was very much respected, and a thoroughly capable woman. You see, she had a way of finding out everything that happened in Aldersford, and she was pretty keen on scandals. Some of the guardians have reason to know that. She was sharp on the police, I can tell you. We did not half like to have her on the bench ;

and she was a fair terror to all the wasters who appear repeatedly at Petty Sessions."

"You don't think it is a case of revenge?"

"No! I know my district and all the toughs in it. Not one of them has the spirit or the wits to commit a cold-blooded murder. I don't know what one or two of them might do when in drink. But I am sure of this, if any bad character in Aldersford had committed this murder I should have had him in charge long ago, and there would have been no need for you."

"Well, let's go on to Miss Courtland, the sister."

"Now she is popular. Everyone likes her. She has a kind smile and a civil word for everyone, and she never interferes."

"Was she dependent on her sister?"

"I don't know. I should think not. She does not look like a dependant. No doubt her sister had most of the money, but Miss Courtland figured in all the subscription lists, but for very small amounts."

"Did she tell you anything after the murder?"

"The poor lady was seated in the drawing-room, looking so mazed and helpless that I could only say how sorry I was. Everybody in the town is sorry for Miss Courtland. It must be an awful blow for her."

"Now we come to the servants. How many are there?"

"There are three maids in the house, and a gardener-chauffeur. There is also a man who helps in the garden two days a week, and usually there has been a garden boy, but they have not got one at present. You would like particulars. First, there is Alice Goodman, the cook; she is the daughter of a small farmer at Badenhams, very tidy family. She had been in Mrs. de Morville's service long before she came to The Elms. The same can be said of Harriet Nokes. Her brother keeps the 'Cross' at Badenhams, as his father did before him. Then there's the housemaid; her people live in Back Lane,

but her mother is a Badensham woman, too. Elsie Evans is a pretty girl, and I believe she's under notice."

"Do you know why?"

"Well, I have heard—but, mind you, it's only gossip—that Mrs. de Morville caught her with young Fred Milward in the kitchen last Saturday night. They've been walking out for months."

"And Fred Milward?"

"He's under-keeper at the Manor; there's nothing wrong about Fred Milward but his temper."

"His temper, eh? An under-keeper, too!"

"Now don't you go suspecting him. The worst I know about him is that he was warned off the field at the Coldmorton match for insulting the referee; and the referee, you know, was a Coldmorton man, and lots of us thought he wasn't fair. You can take my word for it young Fred is not a likely man to murder anyone."

"I see, you are sure to be right—but, as you said just now, if the murder had been done by a likely man you would not have wanted me. I am sure you will make inquiries as to Fred Milward's whereabouts yesterday afternoon."

"All right, but you haven't asked yet about the gardener-chauffeur."

"Well what about him?"

"He's the only man I do suspect, but, mind you, I have no evidence. His name is George Stevens, and he's a foreigner—comes from London, I understand—answered an advertisement when Tom Beech bettered himself and went to Lord Treholm. He's a Bolshie, I'm told, and talks sedition at the 'Lamb and Flag' when he has had a pint of beer. He's young, and he's well set-up, but he has a nasty look in his face that I don't like."

"How does he come into the story?"

"Mrs. de Morville gave Harriet a note to be taken up to the Manor at four. Let us suppose he started at four-five. To go and return should not have taken him ten minutes. We will give him

fifteen, and suppose he was back in the kitchen-garden at four-twenty. According to his own account he went and fetched some vegetables which were wanted for dinner, and he had just reached the back door, when Harriet arrived screaming that the mistress was dead. He helped Harriet carry the poor lady upstairs, and subsequently went up to the Manor to tell Sir Walter the news."

"Shall I meet anyone else at the house?"

"The nephew, Mr. Charles. They wired for him, I know, last night."

"Who is he?"

"Oh, he came there as a kid. His father is a colonel in India, and Mrs. de Morville mothered him. He is now at a place called Sandhurst, learning to be a soldier."

"Is he a Courtland or a de Morville?"

"Neither. He is a sister's son. His name is—blessed if I haven't forgotten it. We always call him 'Master Charles'."

"I suppose there's nothing against him?"

"His licence has been endorsed," said the Super, and he smiled at me.

"Well, I think I know enough to go on with. Keep an eye on Fred Milward and the Bolshie, and I will drop in this evening for a crack."

"Are you going up to the house?"

"Not at one-ten. Miss Courtland will be wanting her lunch, and I don't live on air. I am going to fix up my quarters at the 'Rose and Crown' and have a bit of food. I expect I shall find the Press there, shan't I? Well, it is easier to deal with the Press when you don't know anything than when you suspect quite a lot. They will want to snapshot 'Inspector Frost, who is in charge of the case'. That's good business for them and me."

"And what shall I tell them when they come here? I told them this morning I had nothing to report, but that they might look in at half-past four."

"Oh, tell 'em we are following a hot scent, and that in a day or so there will be startling disclosures,

No, that won't do. It would encourage them to hang about. I know—wait a bit. You have a map over there. Where's The Elms? I see. And Coldmorton. Yes, straight road, distance about four miles. Now give me a pencil."

On a sheet of my note-book I wrote :

The police would welcome any intelligence about a middle-aged gentleman who was walking between Aldersford and Coldmorton on Monday afternoon. He was of medium height, had blue eyes, a closely-clipped moustache, and a military appearance. He was dressed in a cloth cap, a loose tweed coat, plus-fours, and brogues.

I tore out the sheet and handed it to the Super, who appeared completely mystified, so I went on : "That will keep people talking, and if they talk enough, some day someone will say something that is useful to us. I should think that notice will especially interest gentlemen in the club-house at Coldmorton—famous links, aren't they? The description should apply to a good many of the members. Besides, that notice will send the Pressmen all scurrying over to Coldmorton, and keep them from messing up my work here. Good-bye."

CHAPTER III

I.10 P.M.—2 P.M.

THE "Rose and Crown" was an old-fashioned coaching inn with great bow windows on the ground floor and the story above. The hostess made me very welcome, though her house seemed full of people. She was evidently doing a brisk trade in supplying drinks to men who had dropped in to compare notes about the murder and learn the latest news. She, however, did not underestimate future possibilities of trade through having the man who would detect the murderer on the premises. She had a charming sitting-room on the first floor where I could see people and do my writing. She would show it to me herself. She took me upstairs, and I could truthfully assure her it was just what I wanted. It had a bow window which commanded the street. From it I could see the police station, the "Lamb and Flag", the Bank, the Post Office, the principal linen-drappers, and the Wesleyan Chapel. What more could a detective wish to watch? Only the church was not in view, and that did not matter, as my hostess explained there were no daily services, and I had every intention of being in Brixton by Sunday.

My hostess, who was standing behind me while I looked out of the window, called my attention to two women who had just come out of Denton's, the linen-drappers.

"I can't see their faces," said I, "but they have most respectable backs."

"They are Mrs. de Morville's maids, and that's just what they are, real respectable women. Now I

expect they have been about the funeral or to order their blacks. Miss Courtland was there this morning—Denton's the undertaker, you know. It's wonderful the poor lady had the heart to come out. My heart bled for her. She looked that lonely coming along the street, taking no notice of anybody. So unlike Miss Courtland. But I was glad Denton had the job. The Elms have always dealt locally. They are not like some people who must go to London to be worse served."

"The shop looks very up-to-date to judge from its windows."

"Yes, Mr. Denton's father and grandfather had it before him. It's an old business—but Mr. Denton was apprenticed to a tip-top firm in the City, so I am told, and when his father died, he fairly opened the eyes of Aldersford by putting in those plate-glass windows. We are proud of them, and there's something new to see in them every day. I wonder now if Mrs. de Morville's cook saw those black hats, they were new this morning. I said to myself, when I saw them: 'If my brother were to die it's one of those hats I would buy for the funeral.' They're not cheap; but there, Miss Courtland will see that they have what's becoming."

"I suppose Miss Courtland may have to leave The Elms, and then those women will lose their places."

"You're right! And I am sorry for them—I really am. Being so long in one place they'll never get settled again. I wonder what Mrs. de Morville has left them—that is, poor lady, if she made a will. I've made mine. As I always say, you never know when you will be took."

Not wishing to dispute this proposition, I asked if I might see the bedroom, and my hostess, turning from the window, opened a door on the right, showing me a pleasant, airy bedroom just over the porch of the hotel. It had the further convenience, she assured me, that the bathroom was just opposite.

I approved the room and reluctantly declined it, to the great surprise of the landlady, who is not

altogether a fool. All her best bedrooms had been taken by the gentlemen of the Press and by commercials. She had only two little bedrooms left at the back of the house.

I said that I liked little rooms to sleep in, and that I disliked the noise of the street, that I slept with my window open and blinds up, and invented other excuses for my decision, and then went to see two stuffy little rooms at the back of the house, and finally selected one which communicated with the back stairs and presumably with a back door. Not that I had any particular intention of prowling at night, but it is well to be prepared. My real reason was that Billy Smith must now take the room over the porch which communicated with my sitting-room, or the stuffy little apartment next to mine. Being pretty sure of his decision, I had slipped the key of the communicating door into my pocket, unperceived.

A few minutes later I entered the coffee-room and was hailed uproariously by young Harry Holloway of *The Daily Intelligence*, who was lunching with two other newspaper men, both of them Scots.

"Hello, Inspector, you come? Why, it is quite like old times when we solved the Lincolnshire mystery. Come along and join us, we are dying to know who did it."

"Haven't you found that out yet? I am glad that *we* are necessary for the solution; but I am afraid I can't help you at present. I have just arrived, and so far I have only seen the reports of the local police. The Superintendent can tell you all I know."

I found that Master Harry had reason for his high spirits, and that his friends were a little glum. Harry had motored down very early in the morning, and being a plausible and personable young man had managed to get into the drawing-room of The Elms and to interview Miss Courtland. His friends coming afterwards had been denied admittance. Having seen Miss Courtland he had been able to snapshot her as she came out of Denton's shop. His friends had had to be content with "snapping" the

cedar tree near which the tragedy occurred. Harry was not giving away anything that Miss Courtland had said, but was full of wild surmises in the hope of drawing me out.

On my part I am always willing to instruct the Press, so I illustrated the impossibility of his suggestions by events in my past experience which the public ought not to forget. The past triumphs of Inspector Frost make very good "copy", and to tell of them diverts attention from his present activities.

"Have you yet a clue?" asked the Scotch boy who still believed in pertinacity, though it had proved unavailing with The Elms' parlourmaid.

"Dozens," I replied. "That's the difficulty. There are so many who might have done it, and you have to prove that all but one didn't."

"And then you nab him?"

"No, before you do that, you have to be pretty certain that you have the sort of evidence which will convince a jury. Bless you, I know of more than one murderer now walking the streets unafraid, because we could not get the right sort of facts to ensure a conviction."

"When it comes to facts," said Harry, "we are the boys to collect them."

"All right," said I, "I'll give you a tip. There's the Station Hotel, the 'Lamb and Flag' on the other side of the street, and a still lower type of pub a little farther down. You had better arrange that one of you spends the evening in each of them, and then pool your information."

"How about the 'Rose and Crown'?"

"Oh, I shall be on guard here, and if you bring me any news worth having, you shall have a square deal. That's all right! So-long!"

The young varmints! I don't think that any of them know Billy Smith by sight, but they may. Anyhow, for the sake of future inquiries I don't want them to associate us together. Then you never

know. Even they might pick up something useful in one of those stinking bars.

With such thoughts I stepped out into the street, and stopped to ask a passer-by the way to The Elms. I heard the window of the coffee-room opening a little. I knew that three men were kneeling on the coffee-room floor; I knew that three cameras were pointing at me; and I knew that I should appear in three London dailies to-morrow as "The man in charge of the case". Such is fame!

CHAPTER IV

2 P.M.—3 P.M.

ALDERSFORD is not one of those little towns which straggle into the country. It ends abruptly at the park palings of Sir Walter Gerrans on one side and on the other with the town meadows—common land sloping down to the river. The lodge-gates of the Manor were not above two hundred yards from the “Rose and Crown”, and another two hundred and fifty yards of a winding road brought me to another gate which I assumed was the way to the back door and stables. A dozen yards nearer to the town on the other side of the way was a long swing-gate, painted white, which led to The Elms, and near it was a very obvious policeman in plain clothes. I looked at my watch and introduced myself to him, but he was a dull dog who did not even smoke, and nothing was to be got out of him. I stayed with him ten minutes, because I wanted to gauge the traffic, and during that time only two motors, one cart, and one pedestrian passed. You could only see the road thirty yards in either direction owing to the curve and the plantations of the Manor and The Elms. It was in consequence possible that a murderer could have slipped in and out without being observed.

“Not much traffic for the main road between Aldersford and Coldmorton?”

“Well it is and it isn’t a main road. If you were going from Coldmorton to Dolminster you would go the other side of the river, and if you were going from Coldmorton to Larnham you would take the London Road. Aldersford is in a loop of the river, and a God-forsaken hole.”

"You don't belong here?"

"No, thank the Lord, I live nearer to Coldmorton. The Super put me here because I am not known, and it's a mighty dull job with nothing to do but spit."

Before leaving him I tried to cheer him up with the thought that he might yet meet an armed assassin, but I doubt if he had enough imagination to feel frightened by anticipations.

Then I passed through the swing-gate and up the short carriage-drive, through overgrown shrubberies. Just before coming out on the open, the road divided into two; one apparently swept right round the house to the stables which must be on the other side, the other brought me to the front door.

The house was a Georgian building of red brick, three stories high, surmounted by a coping of stone, and faced a semi-circular lawn of considerable extent. Away to the right was the cedar tree; there were half a dozen elms in the background, and a splendid holly hedge that bounded the lawn and curved round on the other side of the cedar tree to shut out the kitchen-garden. A path from the end of the sweep led to the opening, and I caught a glimpse of an herbaceous border.

"Here," I soliloquised, "in broad daylight on an open lawn commanded by fourteen windows, with four people in the house and a gardener on the other side of the hedge, a woman has been killed, and there is no sign of the murderer. Either he must have known the ground very well and calculated his time, or he was a born fool to make the attempt. Unfortunately, born fools do sometimes commit great crimes, and it is their inconceivable folly which makes detection difficult."

The parlourmaid, Harriet Nokes, when she opened the door did not please me: her lips were too compressed, and her eyes like needles. Neither did my appearance please her. I noted the disfavour with which she looked at my clothes. She told me curtly that Miss Courtland was too unwell to see anyone, and that she had no information to give.

I said: "Tell Miss Courtland that I am Inspector Frost of Scotland Yard, sent down from London to investigate this mystery; that, of course, I will not intrude on her to-day if she is unwell, but I should like to see over the house."

Harriet looked at me suspiciously and then, asking me to wait, shut the door in my face. It was half glass, so I saw her go into an adjoining room, and a minute later she returned, opened the door once more, and showed me in to Miss Courtland.

The lady was a surprise to me. I had imagined a dowdy and fluttered spinster who had lived long years in subjection to an older and domineering sister. I met a handsome woman who did not look much over forty, carefully dressed, with faultless manners and perfect self-possession. She looked, indeed, tired and ill, as well she might after her terrible experience, but, as she sat with easy dignity, in a high but comfortable arm-chair, what impressed me most was her composure.

During our conversation I was taking in the surroundings. The room was full of inherited furniture, derived no doubt from Courtlands and de Morvilles, but everything looked as if it had been designed for the place where it stood. Every piece of china, even the flowers, seemed to belong to the room and the lady who was mistress there.

I began, of course, by apologizing for my intrusion at such a time, but Miss Courtland was quite gracious. She feared that she could tell me nothing that Superintendent Thomas did not know, but she quite understood that a man in my position would want to inquire for himself. She was ready to help in any way she could.

What had she been doing yesterday afternoon? Well, after lunch she had gone up to lie down in the room directly above. Yes, she had pulled down the blinds. I would understand—the windows faced the south. She got up about four-fifteen, and was arranging her hair, when she heard Harriet scream.

"I went downstairs at once, and there was my dear sister lying dead on the lawn." The lady's voice broke slightly, and she excused herself, saying: "You must pardon me, but you cannot know what my sister has been to me for years."

In answer to further questions, she assured me that there were no undesirable relatives, that Mrs. de Morville had no worries, had received no strange visitors, or to her knowledge any threatening letters. What had her sister been doing recently? Well, last Friday was her birthday. She was fifty-five. On Saturday she had motored into Dolminster to lunch at the Deanery. She and Susan Ackroyd had been at school together. "I did not go, for when a little child in the awful presence of two head-girls. Martha and Susan got together, I felt I was once more On Sunday we both went to church, morning and evening, and after supper Sir Walter Gerrans came in for a chat. He has done so from time to time. He is a widower, you know, and I fear very lonely."

"It's a great impertinence for me to ask—but is there a possibility that Mrs. de Morville was contemplating a second alliance?"

"Certainly not! We were just neighbours, good neighbours, nothing more. When we had guests he always dined with us; when he had a house-party we dined at the Manor. He sometimes called to consult Martha about people in the parish or about magistrates' work. My sister was, you know, quite a public character, and an exceedingly capable woman. They also had tastes in common. They were both a little mad on heraldry and genealogies, and when they began to climb their respective family trees, I generally went up to bed. I did so on Sunday night—besides, I had a slight headache. You see, Martha was always so kind, and she insisted on Sir Walter's smoking; and I am so Victorian—I know it is very silly—but cigar smoke makes me ill."

"How did Mrs. de Morville spend yesterday morning? I know about the afternoon."

"Well, she went out about eleven. I think she

went to see a Mrs. Evans, the mother of our little housemaid. My sister thought she ought to know she was carrying on with a certain young man. The young man was found in our kitchen last Saturday night. I understood from Martha that he had been almost impertinent."

"I have already heard in the town—perhaps wrongly—that Mrs. de Morville was somewhat severe, and quite able to deal with impertinence."

"She was, but you must not misjudge my sister. She was strict in her views and very downright in her speech, but a better, a more generous woman never lived. I ought to know. I am her sister, and have lived with her for twelve years without the least disagreement. Of course, she liked her own way—we all do. Of course, she did not like to be contradicted—I found that out in the nursery—but she was no despot. She was very angry with Elsie and furious with that young man, but Elsie would not have been sent home at the end of the month if she had shown that she was sorry."

"Then you don't suspect the young man, who, I am told, has a temper?"

"Of course not. Aldersford people do not commit murders because there has been unpleasantness. We are not that sort of people. I don't suspect anyone, but I cannot help thinking—but then, it would be absurd for me to make a suggestion to a man of your experience."

"On the contrary."

"Well, isn't it possible that my dear sister was shot by some unsuspected homicidal maniac who probably now does not know what he did?"

"It is possible, but in that case he will probably not be discovered, and I am here to discover a murderer, so I shall only accept your hypothesis if I fail. Do you mind telling me who benefits by Mrs. de Morville's death? I am told that she was a lady of considerable means, and had a life interest from her husband's estate, which brought in £3,000 a year."

"The people of Aldersford are so kind. They even attribute to us more than we possess. My sister received £1,200 a year under her husband's will. The capital will now be divided between the S.P.G. and S.P.C.K. She had also £500 a year, a third share of my father's estate. My other sister and myself benefit to that extent by her death. She also has probably considerable savings. We have often discussed investments, and she has told me that she has bought shares in this or that company, but I have no idea what such savings may come to, nor do I know the terms of her will. It is with her solicitor, an old family friend, who will be here to-morrow. I may be the beneficiary. Again, I think it is likely that she may have left a large sum to Charlie Steele, my nephew. She was so devoted to him."

"Is your nephew with you now?"

"No! That is what is worrying me. Sir Walter sent him a telegram at once, and I thought he would have arrived last night. He has a motor-bicycle, and it is not more than forty miles from Sandhurst. At any rate, I expected him by the morning train."

"No doubt there were formalities about getting leave."

"But he might have wired."

"The young have not lived long enough to know how older people feel. That is why we think them so very inconsiderate."

"You could apologize for anything," said Miss Courtland with a smile. "Now do you want to examine the servants as Superintendent Thomas did? If so, you may sit in my sister's workroom opposite and I will send them in to you one by one."

"No, thank you. I should like to see over the house. You wonder why? Well, you see, I find in these inquiries it is often some odd little thing that no one has noticed which leads to a discovery. The better able you are able to realize how and where a victim lived, the more likely you are to discover who murdered her. I shall, I suppose, see your maids informally as I go round. That will be sufficient.

One thing more—may I sit in the workroom you mentioned, and write up my notes, before I go out to examine those footprints which the Superintendent told me about? I should also like a talk with your gardener in the garden.”

“He prefers to be thought of as the chauffeur who gardens,” said Miss Courtland as she rang the bell.

A minute afterwards I was handed over to Harriet.

CHAPTER V

3 P.M.—3.15 P.M.

APART from Mrs. de Morville's workroom, which I had arranged to examine by myself, I had no particular wish to see the house. It is useless to search a house when you don't know what to look for. I really wanted to see the three maids informally, and to discover how the murder appeared from their point of view, but Harriet was not encouraging. She took me across the hall, threw open the opposite door, and said: "Mrs. de Morville's workroom," and then stood aside for me to enter. It was of equal size with the room I had just left, but oh! so different. It might have been a man's comfortable study. I wondered for a minute whether the two sisters had often sat together, or whether they had each lived most of their lives with the hall between them. One thing indeed they had in common—tidiness. Everything in Mrs. de Morville's workroom looked as if it were exactly in its place.

I nodded to Harriet to go on as I came out. A long flight of stairs faced us on the right; on the left was a door which was thrown open. "The dining-room," said Harriet.

Feeling that this was her domain I remarked that everything was beautifully kept.

"The ladies are accustomed to having things done properly," said Harriet, and her look implied that I was not.

She then took me upstairs and showed me the best spare bedroom, the dressing-room and Miss Courtland's room. The afternoon sun was pouring into it, and I said:

"I 'am afraid Miss Courtland has not been able to lie down this afternoon or the blinds would have been drawn down."

"How could she?" said Harriet. "You coming when you did. That is Mrs. de Morville's room; do you want to go in there?"

"Not to-day," I said quietly, "but I do want to see the top floor." Harriet fairly snorted as she took me on to the top landing, where the three maids had separate rooms.

There was also a room that was quite empty, and a box-room, where, for the first time, I saw signs of disorder. The casement window flew open as we opened the door and banged. Harriet went and fastened it at once, saying:

"There! It was banging all last night, and I thought it was my nerves. If I had known that girl had opened it without screwing it down, I'd have had her out of bed and shaken her. Look at the room, it makes me ashamed of the house, the lazy slut!"

"We have all been young, Miss Nokes."

"Young folk were not like that in my time, and that's not so long ago, either," said Harriet as we went downstairs.

A door from the first landing communicated with a long passage which ran over the back premises. There were three more bedrooms. The first near the back stairs was Mr. Charles's room. It was adorned with many pictures and portraits, some Indian curios, football groups, and over the mantelpiece a large framed photograph.

"Wellington College," I said.

"I suppose so," said Harriet. "He was at school there."

Then we went down the back stairs. A baize door communicated with the hall, and the first room was still called Mr. Charles's play-room, though of late Mrs. de Morville took her Mothers' Meeting there and her Girls' Friendly Class.

"It is near the back door, so they did not bring

much dirt into the house. They, at least, won't come any more," said Harriet, and it was the first note of satisfaction I had heard in her voice.

"This is my pantry," she said, as if daring me to enter, but in I went. It was a small square room, and on a table in front of the window that looked out directly on the back drive was a considerable amount of silver.

"Old Georgian silver," said I, and then with a last attempt to propitiate Harriet, I added: "And beautifully kept."

"The old Rector came of the old gentry," said Harriet. "Do you want to see the kitchen?"

"I don't think I should like to leave such valuable plate about, where anyone coming to the back of the house can see it. You know it would not need a very clever thief to open that window and make off with the lot."

"We don't know much about thieves in Aldersford."

"So I suppose, but I have had a good deal to do with them and murderers also."

Harriet did not rise to the suggestion. She only said again: "Do you want to see the kitchen?" Then, going to the door, she said: "Cook, here is the policeman who wants to see your kitchen!" She opened the door and left me, to my great relief.

CHAPTER VI

3.15 P.M.—3.40 P.M.

THE kitchen was spacious and spotless, but I don't like rooms with cross lights. Two windows looked out on an enclosed yard with a pump in it, and two looked out on the back drive. A great fireplace was in the centre of the wall opposite to the door, and alongside it was the door into the scullery.

Cook, a comfortable deep-bosomed woman, was rolling out what was to be pastry at the table, and a very pretty girl peeped out of the scullery door, and, meeting my gaze, withdrew. Cook, on the other hand, stood up, grasping the rolling-pin, and looked at me as much as to say: "Come now, what's your business?"

"I am Inspector Frost of the Criminal Investigation Department."

"I don't hold with policemen," said cook. "First there was that Super with his pencil and notebook, asking me what was my name, though he had known me from a child; what was my age, like his impudence!—as if my age could have anything to do with Mrs. de Morville's murder. I thought him a prying old busybody who might have been better employed taking the murderer to the lock-up. Then there was the young man this morning who came into my kitchen without wiping his boots to leave a bit of paper, and tell me I had to be at the Police Court to-morrow. I have never been in one in my life. And now it's you, and you don't look like a policeman. You, you look like a farmer on Fair Day, you do. It's deceitful to look like that if you really are a policeman."

"I am not like other policemen. I was brought up on a farm."

"Were you?" said cook. "And you look like it, too."

"Well, I thought you might help me to find the man who murdered Mrs. de Morville."

"I'd help you fast enough if I knew the man, but I don't. You don't think I would keep quiet if I even had a notion." Cook's management of the rolling-pin at this point was convincing.

"Now, don't you see, nobody knows at this moment who did it. Even I haven't an idea. I go round and talk to people like you, and everyone helps me a little to see how it wasn't done."

"That isn't what you want to know. You've got to find the man who did it."

"If eleven out of twelve didn't do it, the chances are the twelfth did."

"I see," said cook—but I was sure she didn't, though she was interested.

"Dear me," said I, getting up from my chair, "I forgot; and that young policeman, the one who didn't wipe his boots, is so stupid. You noticed it yourself. I must go straight to the station, or they'll be doing the wrong thing, and may be missing the man. What a nuisance, why didn't I tell them?—for I shall have to come back again to search the garden."

"Couldn't the girl take a message? It would do her good to get a mouthful of fresh air. I don't hold with young people staying indoors. Oh, it's all right, there's nothing for her to do. Come here, Elsie. You put on your hat and be quick. The gentleman says it's important."

With apparent reluctance I took out my note-book and wrote :

I want to get this girl out of the kitchen for a quarter of an hour. Tell her it is all right, and that everything is going on well.

Yours, A. FROST.

I folded the paper and secured it with stamp-paper. Then I took out of my pocket half-a-crown, and said: "It is kind of you. I am grateful." She was pleased, and so apparently was cook. I was making the right impression.

"That's a nice, willing girl," I said.

"You are right. There's not a deal amiss in her, whatever folks say, and I ought to know."

"I heard all about last Saturday night in the town, and somebody said they wondered Miss Goodman allowed it."

"Oh, somebody said that, did they? Well, a fat lot they know about it. It was Harriet's night out, and she had gone to Badenhams. I had a headache, and went to bed, and what must that young madam do but let the lad that's courting her into my kitchen. And there the missus found them. He was sitting in my chair—the impudence of it!—and she, the missus said, was sitting on his knee, but Elsie says it was the arm of the chair—and that does make a difference, doesn't it?"

"From what I've heard about Mrs. de Morville, she was at no loss to deal with the situation."

"You're right. Elsie lost her situation—leastways, she got a month's notice, and that young fellow, I reckon, went away with a flea in his ear and his tail between his legs. Then Elsie, she came upstairs sobbing and making such a to-do, that, headache or no headache, I had to get out of bed and go to her. You see, it wasn't Mrs. de Morville that troubled her, but she was feared to go home to her mother."

"Bad home?" I queried.

"Not a bad home, either. I've known Jane Evans since she was a child. Badenhams she is, just like me. She has eight children alive and three buried, and Elsie is the oldest. They are a well brought-up family I allow, but Jane is hard—hard as nails. I dropped in there Thursday afternoon, but she was out washing, and there was that big lad of hers, he's fifteen, and he was nursing the baby and minding

the little ones, and all the other lads in the town were playing football in the meadows. When his sisters came from school he tells me that he would have to pump up the water and chop sticks—pretty little play he gets. I shouldn't like to be that boy, big as he is, if he sneaked for himself one of the pennies he gets for delivering Sunday papers; and I wouldn't like to be Elsie, either, and go home to say, 'I've lost a good place'. I wouldn't, indeed."

"Perhaps the young man will marry her."

"Perhaps he will. He's a nice young man enough in himself, and he's got a good job—and there's lots of pickings up at the Manor. Anyhow, he's fair crazy about Elsie. Most nights he'd come to the back door on his way home. No harm in that. And sometimes I'd let Elsie go with him to the yard door. I expect they wanted to kiss, and, after all, sweet-hearting is natural. I had a sweetheart myself once. That was in War-time. He was shot."

There was a short pause, and I maintained a sympathetic silence. After a minute cook went on:

"After all, being shot in War-time, that's natural, too, in a way, it is not like being shot on your own lawn, like the poor dear mistress, while you are waiting for the tea and buttered toast. No, indeed, I can't believe it—it's not natural. Here were we all so comfortable—Elsie making the toast and me buttering it, and Harriet running in with the dish just as usual and carrying it away—and then, before Elsie and I had finished the slice which was left over we hear Harriet scream 'Murder!' I heard it as distinct as ever could be, though she was the other side of the baize door. I didn't even stop to wipe my fingers of the butter, and we both ran into Stevens coming in at the back with the vegetables, which I had told him to bring hours before. And when we got into the hall there was Miss Courtland a-coming downstairs faster than I ever saw her move—it didn't seem natural—I never shall forget it as long as I live. And there was the poor missus lying on her face, and the tea-tray on the ground, and the

milk-jug upset. I can't say why I noticed the milk-jug, but I had to go and pick it up. Harriet and Stevens lifted the missus and carried her up to her own bed, but we all knew she was dead from the first moment."

"And Miss Courtland?" I asked.

"She just stood as if she were stone, fair mazed, she was, poor thing. She didn't seem to see or know anything, or what was happening. I took hold of her and helped her to the drawing-room. Then I ran upstairs and brought her my own salts, and I patted her arm and said it would all come right, though I knew it wouldn't."

"Who called in the police?"

"Harriet did—not that they were any good; they don't understand things like you, sir—but then, I suppose it was the right thing to do. I will say this for Harriet, she kept her head, and she's used to the telephone. I heard her myself say: 'Murder at The Elms. Come at once'—and they weren't long in coming. The Super came first with another man, and then more of them, and they all came into the house, and the Super put on his spectacles and took out his note-book and began writing everything down, and I went back to Miss Courtland, and said: 'What are we to do?' And she said to me: 'Send for Sir Walter.' So I found Stevens and packed him off, and would you believe it, the Baronet ran all the way from the Manor. Whoever heard the like of that before? Somehow, his being here made all the difference, though for a minute or two he was too blown to speak. He told Harriet to take Miss Courtland to her room and make her lie down. He told me to make her some tea and be sure that she drank it. He told Stevens he was to stay in the house all night, and he told the Super to shut up his note-book and search the garden. Somehow or other he got them out of the house, and then he sat down and wrote telegrams for Colonel Steel in India and Mr. Charlie and for Mr. Treherne, the lawyer, only that couldn't go, for Harriet had forgotten his

address. She knew he lived at an inn. She remembered that because she comes herself from a 'public'. Then Sir Walter went off with his telegrams, and came back with the doctor in his car. And the doctor was quite a long time upstairs. I don't know what he did, but they do say that he found the bullet which killed Mrs. de Morville inside her somewhere."

"And did Miss Courtland remain in her room?"

"She did so as long as Sir Walter remained here, but when he had gone she got that restless we thought she had gone mad. There she was, going upstairs and downstairs, carrying things about. Then she must go outside to see if Mr. Charlie was coming. Then she came back to say there was a policeman at the gate, and he would want some supper. Then she went out to tell him supper was ready, and he said that he could not come. Then she made me cut him sandwiches and put up a bottle of beer. And she made him come and get them while she stood at the gate. It was all so unlike Miss Courtland, you couldn't believe it was her."

"Well, she is not like that to-day."

"No, she's just got back her nerve, poor thing. I don't feel frightened of her to-day. She had her breakfast in bed, but she came downstairs at nine o'clock, looking ill, but much as usual. Then Harriet let in that impudent reporter—I told her it showed no gumption. I don't know what Miss Courtland told her, but Harriet has been awkward ever since—and Harriet, though you won't believe it, can be very awkward indeed. Why, we had to go to Denton's together to see about our clothes for the funeral, and, if there is a time when you want a real friend, it is when you buy clothes. But Harriet was that unpleasant that she never said a word while I tried on hats; and, when I had bought one, she said it was just like one of my pie dishes—and that's all she knows of the latest fashions."

At that moment Elsie, all aglow, burst into the kitchen, saying: "The Super told me to tell you

that 'it is all right, and everything is going on well'."

"Thank you, so much," I said. "I was wrong, perhaps, not to trust that young constable. He is not so bad, after all, even if he does not wipe his boots."

CHAPTER VII

3.40 P.M.—3.50 P.M.

COOK was pleased with me as a conversationalist, because I knew my place and listened. Elsie was pleased with half-a-crown which would not go to her mother. She was also pleased with her walk, and had a sense of her importance. Was she not taking a part in the mysterious process which was to end in the detection of the murderer?

I proceeded to tell her that detectives had to be observant people, that no mistress could be so sharp as a detective in noticing anything amiss; "and I have been all over this house and seen how beautifully it is kept—it's a great credit to somebody, and I expect to you."

She blushed with pleasure, then I continued: "There was nothing out of place anywhere except in the box-room, and one expects disorder there."

"Please, sir, I did out the box-room this day week, but Mr. Charlie was rummaging up there all the afternoon before he went away, and I have not been there since."

"Not even to open the window? Box-rooms get so musty if you don't."

"I will see to it to-morrow. Of course, I ought to have known it would be in a mess."

"Well, I should not do it, if I were you, until after the funeral. Mr. Charlie will be here, and he will probably be rummaging again."

"Yes," said cook, breaking in. "I always said it was ill straightening things up, if Master Charlie was coming along. He'd have been a tidier little boy if I'd had the slapping of him."

"Nonsense, cook, you don't believe in slapping little boys."

"I just do. Often and often have I told Master Charlie how he deserved a whipping, when he came creeping down the back stairs in his pyjamas and little felt slippers, while his good aunts were at dinner and thought he was safely tucked up in bed."

"And you know," said I, "that you took him into your lap and filled his greedy little stomach with the sweets that came out of the dining-room. I know you spoilt him."

"And isn't sweet stuff good for children? We learnt that in the War. I didn't spoil him, not much. There was the day I caught him swinging my cat by her tail in that scullery—and I don't hold with cruelty to dumb animals, I don't—and I took him straight to his aunt and she gave him what for."

"Served him right," said I.

"Well, it did and it didn't. You see, afterwards, when he was in bed, I took him up a big slice of cake—for I don't hold with young children being famished, be they never so naughty—and, would you believe it, he sat up in bed and said: 'It was all your fault. You said you couldn't swing a cat in the scullery, and I knew you were wrong, so I tried.' He was in a temper, too. He said: 'Take away your nasty cake, I don't want it; and I won't forgive you for ever and ever, Amen'."

"But he did," said I.

"Yes! As that nurse they had at the Manor used to say: 'Miss Goodman, you take my word for it, children forgive you as easily as they forget you, and I've been a nurse these twenty years'. She was wrong about Master Charlie. Even when he was quite a big boy, he was always worriting in this kitchen when his aunt thought he was at his lessons; and even now, when he is a grown-up young gentleman, he is never ten minutes in the house without coming to see me. Oh, I wish he was here now! It doesn't seem natural with his dear aunt, who thought the world of him, lying dead upstairs, and

he not here—and we with no one to look to, no one to protect us against thieves and murderers.”

“Oh, you needn't be afraid. For the next few days, until this mystery is cleared up, the house will never be left by the police.”

“But I don't hold by the police. No offence, sir, but you don't look like a policeman. What I says is: Here are these fool policemen making us all go to this inquest of theirs at the Station. What's the good of it—that's what I want to know? It won't bring the poor dear missus to life again, and it won't help nought in finding the murdering villain. They know beforehand all we have to say. Haven't we had to say it more than once, and they licking the points of their pencils and writing it down? Silly jacks in office, that's what they are, without the manners to wipe their boots—making us leave the house with not a soul in it. Who knows who'll be murdered before we get back, and what will be stolen?”

“Well, Miss Goodman, you take my advice. Lock up very carefully, and don't put the front door key under the mat. That's just where a thief would look for it. You give it to the policeman outside, and he'll keep it safe till you come back. You must trust someone, you know, and, after all, he's honest. And now I must be getting on and do some writing. May Elsie take me to Mrs. de Morville's workroom? I should be sorry to go in at the wrong door.”

CHAPTER VIII

3.50 P.M.—4.15 P.M.

HAVING reached the so-called workroom—the name itself was significant of Mrs. de Morville's strenuous efficiency—I shut the door and asked Elsie :

"Are you sure you did not open that window in the box-room?"

"Sure, of course. I have not been in since this day week."

"Harriet thought you had opened it and left it flapping. If she says anything about it, don't you answer back; and if she says the condition of the room is a disgrace, don't you argue. Just say you will clean it out directly the funeral is over. If she is rather short with you, you just be quiet and stand behind cook. If I lived in this house I should leave her to fight all my battles! I felt that at once when I saw her handling that rolling-pin. And now, my girl, there's something else I want to say to you. I heard in the town about you and your young man, and you must not mind my speaking about it. You see, I have girls of my own."

"Please, sir, there wasn't any harm in it, there wasn't really."

"Have you seen him since?"

"Once, sir."

"And did he use any of those wicked words about Mrs. de Morville which some folks say he did?"

Elsie was suddenly frightened. Then she looked at me rather like a cat with kittens, and said :

"Fred never said anything wrong about the mistress. He wouldn't."

"Very well! I am glad to hear that. You won't tell him I asked?"

From Elsie I had a very dubious "No". I knew she would, and I wanted her to tell him.

Master Fred Milward might be all that his friends thought, but in the course of justice, it would not do him much harm if he did have the wind up for a day or so.

Having got rid of Elsie, I pulled out my note-book and sat down and wrote half a dozen lines in shorthand. They are of no consequence. I then went and pulled down the blinds. You will remember that the room faced south. Next I went and opened the door, just to see if Elsie was coming back to say something, or if Harriet, in kindly consideration, was coming to see if I had everything I desired.

That done, I began to survey the room. The bookshelves were full of county histories, parochial histories, family histories, records and works on heraldry. In the bookslide on the writing-table were a row of books from the London Library dealing with similar subjects. Mrs. de Morville was evidently a specialist.

On the table was a great "Peerage", neatly annotated and corrected throughout, with references to authorities. There were papers sticking in it, so I came at once to the Courtlands, and discovered that the founder of the family was a grocer in Cheapside, who made money and became Lord Mayor and a baronet towards the end of the eighteenth century. I also discovered that Mrs. de Morville and her sister were second cousins of the fifth baronet. I turned on to de Morville and found the present holder of the title was the twenty-second baron—a sheet of paper was here inserted to show that the Reverend John de Morville was descended from the second son of the sixteenth baron.

This was interesting, but did not seem at the moment to further my inquiry, so I tried the drawers in the knee-holed writing-table and found them all

unlocked. In the four drawers to the left, I found nothing but documents relating to genealogies. They were done up in great brown paper covers, labelled Courtland, de Morville, Gerrans, Treholm, Baddeley of Badenharn, Denton, and others.

I did not look further. In the right-hand drawers were subscription lists, minutes and agenda papers, some Acts of Parliament, and reports. They were evidently arranged for immediate reference. It does save a detective time when he comes on the papers of a really methodical woman!

I then turned to the Sheraton bureau near the fireplace, which had rather a high chair near it, and looked as if it were used. It was locked, so I once more opened the door to make sure that Harriet was not about. Two minutes later I had picked the lock, which was a very primitive affair! I turned down the flap once more to admire the order of everything! There was a little pile of letters under a letter weight. They were all in envelopes and had been opened with a paper-knife. They had evidently arrived on Monday morning, and not one of them contained anything of the least interest!

Then from a pigeon-hole I took a little bundle of receipts secured by a rubber band. They were folded, docketed, and dated. They all belonged to the current quarter, and here I found something of interest. I found six—two from tailors, one each from a bootmaker, hatter, hosier, and a tobacconist. Altogether they came to more than £100. They were "to account rendered", and the account was that of Mr. Charles Steel. "Oh!" said I. "The good aunt has been paying his debts. He had been but a few months at Sandhurst and I wonder on what he has spent his no doubt adequate allowance!"

Next I drew out the lady's cheque book. It was evident that she paid nearly everything by cheque and entered pretty full details on the counterfoils. It was evident also, that on most Monday mornings she drew £5 for petty cash. Last Saturday she had paid several small bills, and one to Denton's for £37.

Then came a counterfoil that was not cancelled, and not filled up.

Finally on Monday morning, "for Self £5". The blank counterfoil intrigued me, and I took the number. It only suggested something hidden because Mrs. de Morville had evidently been so meticulous in her expenditure—"meticulous" is here the right word.

When the bureau was closed, I breathed more easily. You see, the fear of Harriet was upon me; but I should not have minded greatly if she had discovered me looking at the big album in the window which contained photographs. After all, it was placed there to be looked at!

I found in it a good many groups of no interest, a good many portraits of the late Mr. de Morville—at least I judged no one but his wife would have collected so many replicas of his quite uninteresting appearance. I found also a series of portraits of Master Charles Steel, from the time when he was a frail little boy fresh from India, to the time when he was a smart young cadet in uniform. Just as I was shutting the book an old cabinet photograph fell out. It was faded, and had been taken by a Cheltenham firm. It portrayed a family group with little attempt at art. A stiff military gentleman sat staring at what was probably the camera, and a large lady sat beside him, also staring at the same object. Behind them stood two girls—I guessed between eighteen and twenty—both looking down dutifully at Papa and Mama. On the ground sat a boy of about sixteen and a girl who was a little younger, and they were gazing in rapture, apparently at nothing! "Colonel and Mrs. Courtland, no doubt," said I, "with their family. The elder girls, no doubt, represent Mrs. de Morville and Mrs. Steel, the youngest Miss Courtland, but I have heard nothing of a brother, and Miss Courtland spoke distinctly of having a third share in the father's estate. I suppose he's dead."

I went back to the table and consulted the

"Peerage", and found that Colonel Courtland was credited with three daughters—Martha, Mary, and Clare. "I should like to know something about the brother," I said.

Just then I heard a bell ring—the drawing-room bell, I thought. Someone came into the hall. The drawing-room door opened and closed, and when Harriet appeared before me I was just turning the leaf of the note-book with one hand, and had a pencil suspended in the other.

"Miss Courtland wishes to know if you would like some tea?"

"Will you thank Miss Courtland, but I have just finished my work, and must not stay."

Harriet disappeared, and after waiting three minutes I left the house, not noisily, but with sufficient sound to be heard.

CHAPTER IX

4.15 P.M.—4.30 P.M.

THE "Footsteps" which I had next to investigate were in the shrubbery just beyond the angle of the house, and opposite to the back drive. They were not difficult to find, as the Super had marked the spot by a hurdle in the grass border, and he had done considerable damage to shrubs by carrying in planks which enabled one to follow the prints without confounding them with the ground trampled by his assistants.

I walked straight along the planks, to the place where the footprints ended, and saw that from where the man had stood he would have been well hidden, but yet would have had a good view of the lawn. It was an ideal place for such a murder as had been committed. I bent down to find a clear footprint, for as the man had returned on his tracks, a complete and distinct one was hard to find in the dry crumbling mould.

Just before I found what was wanted I caught sight of a small brown bone button, which I picked up and put into my pocket—"The Super," I thought, "ought not to have overlooked that."

Finally, by comparison I made out conclusively that the man had worn heavy boots, hobnailed and of a large size. The evidence was clear.

Creeping back along the boards I came to the second man's footsteps. One or two of them on the loosened mould were quite clear and distinct. He had only penetrated some four feet into the shrubbery, and had returned. He had worn light boots with rather pointed toes. In all cases his foot-

prints were superimposed on the heavier man's, so he must have entered and left his hiding-place after the other man had departed.

I was crawling out into the open, when a voice said, "Well?" I looked up and there was my friend cook, watching me with interest and perhaps amusement. When you weigh fifteen stone I suppose you look a little ridiculous on all fours!

"Well?" said I, rather hot and a little annoyed.

"I call it a sin," said cook, "in clothes like yours to be crawling like a child in the dirt!"

"It's clean dirt," said I, "and it's dry." And I stood up and began dusting my knees while cook watched me.

"Now," she said as I put my handkerchief back in my pocket, "what have you found out? That young man who came this morning, the one who didn't wipe his boots, told me that those marks were of great importance, and that when the great man from London saw them he would know at once who shot the mistress, and go straight off and put the handcuffs on him. I didn't believe him, for I knew he was a fool. 'It isn't natural,' I said. 'If a man from London can do that it's just black magic, and I don't believe in Black Magic, and don't want to.'"

"Well, Miss Goodman, I am not a magician!"

"Well, you don't look like one, nor like any conjuror that I've ever seen! But what I want to know is just this: What have you found?"

"As you've been so kind to me, and will promise not to tell anyone—"

"Do you think I'd tell? I am not one that talks!"

"Well, then! If you promise to keep the secret I don't mind telling you that there have been two men in that shrubbery—that one of them was tall, and wore hobnailed boots and gaiters, and one of them was a light man, about five feet eight inches, and wore gentleman's shoes."

"And which of them did it?" asked cook, who began to gape with astonishment.

"I did not say that either of them did it—remember that! There is only one thing more I can tell you—" Cook was evidently excited. "It is this: your friend, the Super, is a much cleverer man than you think. He has shown sound judgement in his deductions from the evidence before him."

"Lor!" said cook. "One lives and learns! And what are you going to do next?"

"I am going to have a little chat with George Stevens, the chauffeur-gardener, and I suppose if I go through that little gate into the kitchen-garden I shall find him at work?"

"Oh, yes! You'll find him there, or in the stables right enough, but whether you find him at work—well! that's as may be."

"Good-bye, Miss Goodman, and thank you so much for all your kindness. You've helped me immensely—more than anyone else I have talked to to-day!"

"Now, what do you mean by that? Is that a London compliment?"

"No! It's truth," said I. "Good-bye."

CHAPTER X

4.30 P.M.—5 P.M.

I FOUND George Stevens with his back towards me digging most industriously. He had not been digging long, to judge by the amount that had been done, and it was obvious that four out of the six feet of up-turned soil had been turned up some time. It may have represented his work on the previous day.

"Hullo!" said I.

"Hullo!" he replied without turning round.

"I am Inspector Frost, of Scotland Yard."

"I heard you were nosing round!"

"So suppose you give up your digging that we may have a little talk."

He stood up, a big young man, and turned on me a sullen, disagreeable face; and, but for his expression, he would have been handsome.

"You are George Stevens, aged 21, and you have been in Mrs. de Morville's employ for rather over a month. Now, first of all I want to know your previous situation!"

"I was with Austin Whiting, the M.P., of Princes Gardens, before I came here. I left with a character."

"You were chauffeur?"

"One of them. There was the man who drove the big Rolls to the Ritz with his wife, while I drove him in the old Ford down to his constituency in Whitechapel. There was also the small fast car which he drove himself when he went out by himself on the spree."

"Why did you leave him?"

"Out every night and very small pay. He was one of those who spouted a lot about sinful waste of public money and the wrongs of the poor. He didn't waste much himself, and as for the poor! Well! he thought that Parliament should do something for them."

"How long were you with Mr. Whiting? And where were you before?"

"I was with him best part of a year, and for five years before that I was with the big firm of Samuelson & Levi in Southwark. Went there as a boy, and rose to drive one of the vans. Then we had a strike, and I was just one of those who didn't get back. It was then I became a Young Communist, and the secretary lived in Whiting's borough. That's how I got the job. Oh, I am all right, you can look up my past. I have not known any of the secret police until to-day!"

"And what made you come to Aldersford?"

"I answered an advertisement. It was my cursed luck. I am a chauffeur by rights, but I don't mind a bit of gardening; but do you think I'd have come to a God-forsaken hole like Aldersford, if I'd known that the car went out about once a week, and that most of my time would be spent in this blasted garden, with an old woman chivying me round all day?"

"Your manners and language, my lad, don't remind me of a chauffeur!"

He suddenly drew himself up, touched his hat and said, "No, sir, sorry, sir. What can I do for you?" in the most approved style. Then he burst out once more:

"That's it, isn't it? I can do it all right, but the old woman's dead, and I am not going to do it any more. I am off to a free country, where a man can choose his manners, and where there ain't no aristocrats, nor spies, nor secret police. I am tired of being a wage-slave; fed up with it, I am!"

"And where's the happy place?"

He looked for a minute as if he were going to tell

me to mind my own business, but he thought better of it and answered, "New York."

"It will cost you a bit to get there, and they won't let you land without money."

"Maybe I've got it!"

"Then I congratulate you, a wage-slave, who so early in life has been able to save so much!"

"Well! that's my business!"

"Yes! Now let's come to mine. You were in the garden when your Mistress was killed and must have heard the shot."

"I didn't pay much heed. There's plenty of shooting round here in September. There's that brat of the Squire's. He's got a rifle, looks like a toy—he was potting at rabbits all down the other side of the holly hedge last Saturday. Didn't hit one, the little fool! But he had plenty of lip when I spoke to him. I wish I had been the other side of the hedge! I'd have wrung his neck! I shouldn't be surprised if he shot the old girl. He's the sort of boy who would let off his gun without rhyme or reason—a bloody-minded bourgeois in the making!"

"Do you shoot yourself?"

"No, but I'll learn before the class war."

"Good Lord, drop politics! It isn't my long suit. You just come and show me where you were when you heard the shot."

He took me to the end of the garden path and explained.

"I had been sent with a letter to the Manor over there, and when I got back I remembered that the cook wanted some vegetables and I had them in a basket just here. See! there's the place I pulled two cabbages. It was then I heard the shot!"

"What did you do?"

"Nothing! I went straight to the kitchen."

I thought to myself, "You did not hurry yourself!" The distance was not fifty yards and I calculated that there must have been an interval of six to eight minutes between the firing of the shot and Harriet's arrival in the kitchen! But I said nothing

about that, and asked to see the exact spot where Mrs. de Morville was found.

On our way to the lawn I remarked on his new bright brown leggings. They were not the sort worn by chauffeurs, but I suggested that they seemed too smart for digging.

"They were dirt cheap," he remarked, "and you don't get much that is cheap at Denton's even when he has a sale."

"Now, when I was a boy—and you know I was brought up on the land—we wore corduroy leggings. On cold dark winter mornings, especially if they were stiff through being wet overnight, they were dreadful things to button—but there, you don't wear such things to-day!"

"No, thank God! And I wasn't brought up on the land! I never had no gaiters before these, except those I wore as a chauffeur."

"Well, I shouldn't like to wear those old-fashioned gaiters now!"

"Yes!" he said impudently. "I should like to see you bending to put them on."

How I should like to have put the fear of God into that young man who was priding himself on being rude! He did not know that thirty years ago I was the one really efficient exponent of ju-jitsu in the force, and that at fifty, being light on my feet and as fit as a fiddle, I had no reason to fear any man unacquainted with the science. I am still more than a match for Billy Smith, though he is a promising pupil!

Only professional etiquette prevented me from putting George Stevens on his back with a lock on him that would have made him squeal! As it was I said no more until we had walked round the cedar tree. Then I made him point out where the table was, where the chair was, and where the body was found, face downwards towards the house. I looked all round and made my calculations.

Very few people are good revolver shots except on the films, and it was very unlikely that anyone would

have dared to walk across the lawn in front of the house and shoot a lady. Besides, a man with a revolver cannot resist a second shot. No, I was pretty certain that the weapon was a small rifle! The distance to the holly hedge at the back was about ten yards. The hedge was evidently five or six feet thick and I could see no gap. The distance to the house was about twenty yards, the distance to the place in the shrubbery was about thirty-five yards, and it was about twenty-five yards to the entrance into the kitchen garden.

"Granting," I said, "that she was not shot from the house, from the holly hedge or the shrubbery, someone may have come in by that gate and escaped down the back drive."

"Can't get out that way. That high brick wall runs from the road right at the back of the stables, and along the south of the kitchen garden where the fruit-trees are. The Gerranses built it, who stole the land out of them Town Meadows."

"Ah, thank you! Then she might have been shot from the entrance to the kitchen garden?"

"What! with me in the garden?"

"Yes, if you did it!"

"But I didn't!"

"All right then, with a clear conscience you can go back to your digging. I am sorry to have kept you so long from your work. I have to go up to the Manor."

CHAPTER XI

5 P.M.—5.45 P.M.

I DID not go to the Manor at once, but walked a few yards farther up the road until I came to a gate with a big notice—"Trespassers will be prosecuted". Nothing daunted, I passed through to survey the boundaries of The Elms from the other side. There was a broad and deep ditch, a bank from four to six feet high, and then the holly hedge which seemed even more imposing from this side than from the garden. I had got quite a long way down before I came upon a gap—a large one also—but it was closed with some four or five strands of barbed wire which was rusty but taut. The ends, no doubt, were secured to the two elms which were close together.

The bank had been broken away, so it was clear that, probably in Master Charles's childhood, the gap had been used for exit or entrance, and in a worn step of the bank there was the clear impress of a small foot. Someone had quite recently clambered up to look into the garden. With a tape I took the measurements exactly. The gap was too high for me to see into it from the field, and the foothold too narrow for a man of my size and weight, but I clambered up, steadying myself by holding on to the wire.

What did I see? Only the kitchen-garden and Mr. George Stevens sitting on a wheelbarrow, just by, smoking a pipe!

"Took the wrong turn to Manor, didn't you? I thought you might. I expected you would want to have another look at me. So here I am! And I hope I don't look as hot as you do!"

I retreated into the ditch and then passed on—keeping what I felt to myself. A disconcerting occurrence of this kind is bound to happen sometimes, and it is an advantage also that a man you mean to watch should think you a fool!

At the same time it will not be necessary to discuss this incident with Billy Smith. It has been my duty before now to reprove him most severely for being caught!

I soon came to the corner of the garden, and the holly hedge was continued on the bottom side. This caused me to get through a gap into the Town Meadows at a point where there was another board with "Trespassers will be prosecuted".

Walking along the bottom of the garden I came to the end of the great brick wall ten feet high which ran straight to the road. Bricks and labour must have been alike cheap when it was put up!

Then I turned across the close-clipped grass to the river, and found a most delightful pool of water in a bend of the stream, and pollarded willows were clinging to the bank. It was evidently used for bathing, for there was a notice-board forbidding anyone to do so between ten and five-thirty, and as I saw three urchins scurrying away with towels I concluded that there were those who probably slightly anticipated the time. It was five-twenty by my watch, and they had bathed!

I followed them by a track that ran diagonally across the Town Meadows and ended at a stile just at the beginning of Aldersford. As I crossed the stile, what was evidently a station fly passed me. A young man was sitting far forward on the front seat, looking out of the window. I caught the nervous, strained look on his face. "There," I thought, "goes Mr. Charles Steel to the desolated home of his childhood."

I followed the fly for the few yards, which took me to the lodge-gate of the Manor, and passed in.

On the steps of the lodge in a Windsor arm-chair

sat a very old man with white hair, and what, I believe, is called a Newgate fringe. I stopped and asked if Sir Walter was at home.

"May be he is, may be not," he replied. "He goes out often enough by the back way, and sometimes he goes through the park to the lodge on the Larnham Road."

"I especially want to see him. I am Inspector Frost of the Criminal Investigation Department."

The very old man raised himself slowly out of his chair, his bony hands trembling with the effort.

"Excuse me, sir, I didn't know as who it was. I didn't catch it all. Our Sir Walter is Distinguished Service Order, but the papers only put D.S.O. And you are Inspector Frost?"

"Inspector Frost of the Criminal Investigation Department, and the papers will print it C.I.D."

"You don't say so! But it's a fair mouthful, to be sure. I expect you be the London gentleman as has come down to give the police a bit of your mind! Serve 'em right, too! What are they paid for? To allow a poor innocent lady to be murdered in her own garden, and nothing done? They be mighty hard on a poor chap as has had a drop of drink, and that's about all they're good for."

"You must not say that. You must wait until there has been a full inquiry into the circumstances."

"I know there was an inquiry about our schools, and another London gentleman came down about that. He stayed with the Squire. He was a mighty pleasant gentleman, too. He had a talk with me, just like you, sir. He even asked me why I did not hold with education, and I told him plain, but respectful like, for he was a high-up gentleman just like you, but I said to him: 'The children, now, they've got no manners, and they don't mind their elders and betters, and what we are coming to I don't know.'

"And he says to me, 'How do you make that out?' And I told him, 'The teachers have no manners themselves to teach—meaning nothing disrespectful

—but they come from London, you see.' It wouldn't matter so much if the fathers could give their children a good hiding, but they can't, you see, because of the police interfering. They're our curse, and if you, sir, can take 'em down a peg there are many in Aldersford as would be pleased. Here I sit day after day, and think the world isn't the same what it was when I was young."

"Were you sitting here yesterday afternoon between four and five, and did you see who came along?"

"Nobody as I didn't know."

"Who came that you did know?"

"I don't remember. You see, sir, that boy as is going past on one of them hooting, stinking motor-bikes, much too fast—the police ought to have him. (It was Billy Smith.) Well! If I'd seen him yesterday afternoon, and I didn't, I might have remembered him, a town chap out on a holiday. But you see that lad—he's Prosser's boy going home from school—well, I shouldn't remember him, he's not interesting to old Gunton."

"Well, Mr. Gunton, I must be getting on to see Sir Walter."

"Very well, sir. It's an honour, I'm sure, for the likes of me to have a talk with one of you high-up London gentlemen that come to set us all to rights."

I passed on up the drive which first ran through plantations parallel with the road and then curved in an upward direction.

I had just passed out of sight of the lodge when I heard someone running behind me. It was a small boy, and I caught him by the arm as he passed.

"Hullo, young man, and where are you off to in such a hurry?"

"Please, sir, I can't stop. Grandfather told me to make haste."

"And who is grandfather?"

"Mr. Gunton, sir. He told me to run straight up

to the Manor and tell Mr. Brown 'The London 'Tec is coming, and he is a fathead'."

I let the boy go forward as my herald, and my vanity was not as much hurt as you might think. I am country bred, and I did not take Mr. Gunton too seriously. I know that the delightful simplicity of the English peasant covers a deal of contempt for a town man, and the countryman's sense of humour is his own. Mr. Gunton, I imagine, would chuckle until he choked.

CHAPTER XII

5.45 P.M.—6.30 P.M.

ALDERSFORD MANOR is a long, low, red-brick house with gables at either end, and as I approached it the declining sun made its many windows blaze like jewels. In front was a wide flagged terrace, bounded by a balustrade with tubs full of bright flowers. Wide stone steps led up from the drive to the open front door.

I was not kept waiting. Hardly had I pulled the bell when the butler appeared standing in the doorway. A little dark man with a hatchet face which seemed bereft of all expression. His manner was deferential, but he looked at me as if I was not there, and asked me to come in, while he went to see if Sir Walter would see me.

I entered a large hall full of horned heads. A great bear, stuffed no doubt by Roland Ward, was rampant near the doorway. More than one tiger skin was spread on the ground. There were barbaric arms and outlandish curiosities from many parts, and all the evidence that Sir Walter had hunted wild beast on more than one continent, and that he prized the trophies he had won.

I had scarcely a minute to glance round before I was shown into the library, a large, handsome room with windows looking out on the terrace, and two french-windows looking south. At least, I concluded that there were two, but the farther one was blocked, I imagined, permanently, by a heavy curtain.

Sir Walter was sitting at a table in the centre of the room as I entered, and swung round in a swivel-chair as he rose to meet me. A boy of thirteen

scrambled out of a deep lounge chair by the empty fireplace, where he had been curled up reading one of Edgar Wallace's detective novels.

Sir Walter was a spare man, advanced in middle age; but he moved with the alacrity of youth. He had those quiet, watchful eyes often to be seen in sailors and sportsmen, which betray nothing. His mouth and jaw indicated determination, and I was soon to discover the resources of his reserve.

The boy, on the other hand, was small, well made, and an innocent. He had one of those beautiful faces which women rave about. He looked too good for a wicked world! I know the type! He was as innocent as a child of five, and as irresponsible. He was capable of doing anything that came into his head; and having nothing in his past to deplore, and no ambition to gratify, he had not developed a conscience. The amount of mischief that a small boy like that can get up to is incalculable.

"You had better go, Dick," said his father. "Inspector Frost has come to see me on business."

I interposed. "Excuse me, Sir Walter, I don't think I have anything to say that the young gentleman ought not to hear. I think I may have to ask him some questions."

"Very well," said Sir Walter, and the boy sat down on the chair with his elbows on his knees to listen.

"I have ventured to call on you about the terrible murder which took place yesterday afternoon."

"So I supposed," said Sir Walter, politely attentive.

I know the strong, silent man is a favourite in fiction, but he is no favourite of mine! I prefer to examine a witness like cook. It cramps my style when a witness attends politely, and never speaks the revealing over-word.

"I have been told that Mrs. de Morville wrote you a letter yesterday afternoon?"

"She did. I received it when I came in from a walk."

"May I ask if Mrs. de Morville asked you to come to The Elms?"

"No, she said that she was arriving here at five-thirty."

"But before that time you heard of the death?"

"At five, to be exact."

"The letter, I suppose, did not suggest that Mrs. de Morville was in any trouble?"

"No. Do you want to see it?" He swung round to the table, and groping in a basket-tray, produced the letter.

It was in its envelope and had been opened with a knife, but a glance at the envelope showed me that it had been previously opened and stuck down again. Of this I said nothing, but unfolded the note and read:

Dear Sir Walter,

I am coming up to the Manor at 5.30 this afternoon, and hope you can see me alone. I have made a discovery about which you should be immediately informed. I am afraid it will cause you trouble.

Yours v. sincerely,

MARTHA DE MORVILLE.

"You have, I suppose, no idea about what this discovery was?"

"None."

"And you have not asked Miss Courtland?"

"When I saw Miss Courtland yesterday she was in no condition to be troubled with questions."

"I was told in Aldersford that Mrs. de Morville was a very busy lady, and very interested in the little affairs of the town. May I suggest that you do not attach much importance to this discovery?"

"If a lady of Mrs. de Morville's character and judgement thought it important, it was," said Sir Walter. "Now can I do anything else for you?"

"Yes! I am told that the young gentleman here has a light, small-bore rifle, and it was with such a weapon that Mrs. de Morville was probably shot. In consequence it is my duty to see any such rifles as I may hear of, and find out where they were yesterday afternoon. You understand, in this case, it is a mere matter of form."

"Nonsense! Of course you ought to see it. Dick, fetch your rifle."

"I can't—it's lost!"

"Lost!" exclaimed his father, and he spun round in his chair. "And why have you told me nothing about it?"

"I thought I should find it," stammered the boy. "I have been looking for it all day!"

"Excuse me, Sir Walter," I said, "but may I ask your son a few questions?"

Sir Walter grunted something which I took for an assent.

"Now," said I, "you know who I am—a detective, and you know what a detective is," and I pointed to the novel in the back of the chair. "It is part of my business to find things that are lost, and you don't know how clever I am! I shall find your rifle all right if you answer my questions. Question one: How long have you had it?"

"For a fortnight. Father gave it me on my birthday."

"And when did you use it last?"

"On Saturday, I took it down to the river when I went to bathe. I thought I might get a rabbit on the way."

"And when did you discover it was lost?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Where ought it to have been?"

"In the gun-room."

"It wasn't there—what did you do?"

"I went down to the river. I remember propping it up against a willow when I stripped, and I thought I might have left it behind. But it wasn't there."

"At what time was that?"

"I don't know, but I had to be back for tea at half-past four, and I wasn't more than five minutes late, and then father did not come in until five."

"Four-forty-five, to be exact," said Sir Walter. "I looked at my watch."

"A quarter of an hour seems double that time to a boy waiting for his tea!" I said. Sir Walter only grunted.

"As you came up from the river you must have heard the shot?"

"No, I didn't. I came across the meadows and up the drive."

What a tell-tale face the boy had! He blushed crimson, and I came to the conclusion that Dick did not often tell lies. Sir Walter made no remark, and I continued.

"You have not since found your rifle? Well, then, I've got to help you. Now we must go first to the gun-room and you shall show me where it ought to be, and then to the river where you think you left it. Where we go next will depend."

As we left the library, the butler was arranging newspapers on a side table near the door, but took no notice of us as we passed out of the hall down a long stone passage to a little room at the end not far from the back door. As Sir Walter opened the door I noticed the long glass cupboard, and the long array of guns and rifles in their rack. In the midst was a beautiful little rifle.

"There!" said I to the boy, "I have not been long in discovering your rifle."

The boy looked at me, scared! I saw that somehow he was frightened of me, and instinctively he shrank back to his father's protecting arm.

"It wasn't there yesterday afternoon—I swear it wasn't! And it wasn't there this morning: I looked everywhere for it! Indeed I did!"

It was here that Sir Walter intervened.

"Well, sir, there is the rifle you wanted to see. What more do you want?"

"Two of the cartridges that fit it!"

The boy went to a drawer and found two cartridges, and his hands were trembling as he gave them to me. I said: "Now Master Dick requires an explanation, and I am going to give it to him." I took two steps quietly to the door, opened it, and the butler almost fell into the room!

Dick gave an hysterical giggle, but Sir Walter preserved a devastating silence, and the butler, straightening himself up, said: "I thought I heard you call, sir."

"Quite right," I said, "and with Sir Walter's permission I want to ask you one or two questions."

The man turned his face like a mask towards me, and waited.

"I gather that you look after your master's guns, and clean them. Yes! You also know Master Dick's rifle, and I want to know when you put it back into the rack."

"This afternoon, sir. Sir Walter, I know, gave orders that Master Dick was to clean his own rifle, but it was in such a condition when I found it, that I thought I had better see to it before putting it back. Sir Walter is particular about guns, sir."

"And when did you find it, and where was it?"

"This morning, sir. I found it behind the back door."

"You don't know how long it had been there?"

"No, sir, the place is somewhat dark. I only noticed it this morning."

"Can you tell us of anyone who called yesterday?"

"Yes, sir, Lord and Lady Treholm left cards in the afternoon; and Sir Walter brought in Colonel Sandon to tea at five o'clock."

"At four-forty-five."

"Brought in Colonel Sandon to tea at four-forty-five," said the butler.

"And who came to the back door?"

"I don't attend to the back door, sir."

"Then please inquire, and also find out if anyone brought back Master Dick's rifle."

He was not long away, and returned to say that The Elms' gardener had brought a note at ten minutes past four, that the under-keeper Milward had called with a message just after half-past, and that The Elms' gardener had come with the news of Mrs. de Morville's murder at a quarter past five. Neither had had a rifle in his hand.

This was not quite conclusive, for the rifle took to pieces and might easily have been concealed beneath a coat, but I appeared to be satisfied, and summed up :

"It seems clear that Master Dick put the rifle into the dark corner last Saturday afternoon and it escaped notice." Looking at the boy as I spoke, I was quite sure that he had done no such thing.

"Well," said Sir Walter, "so it ends in 'much ado about nothing'. I think, Inspector, you will confess that you have exploited a mare's nest?"

"Quite so, Sir Walter, but you yourself suggested that the inquiry should be made. Now I should like to know if you can tell me of any other such rifles in the neighbourhood."

"How should I know? There may be. Before the War there was a rage for learning to shoot. Even the ladies learnt. There was a club at Coldmorton. I remember Mrs. de Morville and her sister belonged to it. Mrs. de Morville won a prize. Any of the members—especially the lady members—may have bought a light rifle at that time."

"Thank you. May I go out by the back door?" I asked.

"Certainly," said Sir Walter, leading the way. The passage was narrow, the door opened inwards, and I saw at once how unnatural it would be for a boy in a hurry to shut the door and drop the gun into a dark corner, when he would have to pass the

gun-room on his way to the front of the house, and there was a table on which to put it down.

As we said good-bye, I asked Sir Walter :

“Do you mind telling me the time? I have an appointment with the Superintendent.”

He showed me his watch. It was just a quarter of an hour wrong!

CHAPTER XIII

6.30 P.M.—9 P.M.

THE back way down to the road I found was short, and the way from the gate, *where trespassers would be prosecuted*, to the river was short. It was obvious that no boy in a hurry would have gone all the way across the Town Meadows and back by the carriage-drive. I had no doubt that the footprint on the bank up to the holly hedge was Dick's; and I guessed that he had climbed to look in because he had heard the shot—but why, then, did he lie?

That thought held me until I was close on the gate, and then I noted a track had been made into the plantation, so I followed it among the trees until I came to a broken paling just opposite to The Elms gate; and the snapping of twigs brought the policeman in plain clothes to the opening, and he gaped with astonishment to see me.

"Were you spying on me?" he asked.

"No, I was not thinking of you at all. I was searching this plantation, which none of you seem to have done before."

"Why should we?"

"Well, supposing you had murdered Mrs. de Morville, don't you think this is the sort of place you would have pitched something into that you did not care to have found about you?"

"Blimey! Now, who'd have thought of that?"

Well, to be quite truthful, I hadn't, until I found the broken paling looking out on The Elms gate, and had to explain my position to the constable who was supporting his tired body by leaning against the fence a few feet farther up.

"What have you found?"

"Wait a minute," I said, "and stand with your back against the palings. If anyone is passing I don't want them to see you talking to someone over here."

I poked round and went down on my hands and knees, but I discovered nothing which I had not seen at the first glance—three envelopes lying in different places among the undergrowth. The three envelopes were of the same size, the same cheap stationery. They had been stuck down and opened hurriedly. They were in different stages of dirt and had probably been cast away at different times. None of them had an address or word of writing on them.

"Well?" said the constable leaning against the palings.

"Well," said I, "that broken paling has been used, I think, as an unofficial post-office, and someone came to find the letters."

"And what do you think, now, that has to do with the killing of the lady?"

"I don't know. It's another fact to be accounted for. I am coming out. Don't you move, and when I pass you outside, I shall say 'good day', and if you tell anyone but the Super you have seen me here, you won't be long in the Force."

A few minutes later I was walking up the road, and just stopped at the lodge-gate. Mr. Gunton had gone indoors, but it was just worth while seeing if he was sufficiently interested in the Squire's son to note his passing on the previous afternoon. So I called.

"Forgive me," I said, "but did Master Richard Gerrans come in by this gate yesterday afternoon about half-past four?"

"He didn't—I'll swear to that."

"Quite so. He told me that he did."

The old man peered at me suspiciously, then he said: "I didn't see him, but I drop off to sleep at times. I am well-nigh eighty-three." Mr. Gunton was at least loyal to the Gerrans family.

I soon reached the police station and found the Superintendent framed in the doorway.

"Had a profitable afternoon, and discovered anything?" he asked.

"Lots," I replied. "And, Super, you were right about those footprints!"

"Don't think I told you what I thought."

"Saw it in your eye all right. You're a shrewd man. Most folk would have been taken in! Now, look here, I mustn't tell you any more just now, for there's only just time for me to write out my report. I can do it, can't I, in your room? Then one of your men can take it to Town by the night train. It is necessary to keep in touch with the Yard. Thanks very much. Yes. I have all I want. Just before you go, tell me the name of the butler at the Manor, and how long he has been with Sir Walter."

"His name is Brown. He has been there about two months, perhaps three. I don't know much about him. He sometimes comes down to the 'Rose and Crown' about nine for an hour. He's a quiet man, and well spoken of."

"Thanks," I said, and proceeded to write a full report of what I had done. I suggested that George Stevens's past should be carefully verified, and that anything further about him would be welcome. I also described Brown as well as I could, and asked if he might possibly be identified with any gentleman's servant who had been in the hands of the police.

By the time I had finished, the Super came in with the welcome suggestion that I should take part in the evening meal, and I am bound to say that Mrs. Thomas provided an appetizing supper, and then left us to consume tobacco and a glass apiece of hot grog.

"Now," said the Super, "tell me what you have found."

"First of all, there's the button. You ought not to have missed that. It was by the footprints in the shrubbery."

"As we are agreed that the footprints are not those of the murderer, it doesn't matter!"

"Next, here is the number of a blank counterfoil in Mrs. de Morville's cheque book. How did I get it? Never mind! I am going to find out how much that cheque was for, and who cashed it.

"Then, here is a copy of the note that Mrs. de Morville wrote to Sir Walter half an hour before she was shot. What do you make of it?"

The Super had no suggestion, and asked me the same question. "I don't know," I had to confess.

"Fourth, here is a cartridge which fits Master Dick Gerrans's rifle. We'll get the bullet out and compare it with the one that killed her." We did, and they were identical.

"Oh!" said the Super. "Now that's evidence."

"Lastly, here are three blank envelopes stained by the weather." Then I told him where I had found them, and he confessed that he did not believe in their importance.

"You don't seem to have got any nearer fixing the crime!"

"It is just like a jigsaw puzzle. You find bits; you know they are parts of a picture, and you don't in the least know what the picture will be like when they are all fitted together. We must fit them together first. At present, I confess, I don't in the least know how to relate my facts and finds."

We then began to discuss the town. I found that Sir Walter's feudal position was quite unimpaired, though there was a radical solicitor in the place. His influence had not declined, though he had not entertained since his wife died two years ago. "He sits," I was told, "every night with musty old papers, trying to find out his ancestors."

The Vicar, I understood, did not count for much in the town. He did not get about enough among the people. He's a very kind gentleman, and those who go to church like him. No! Sir Walter does not go very often. "I thought not," I remarked. "If he had gone last Sunday, he would have

discovered how much his watch was out." I asked about Gunton, and the Super told me he had worked from the age of twelve at the Manor, and for the last ten years had inhabited the lodge. "His son is a pretty bad lot. He's doing three months' hard at present for thrashing his wife and children when he was drunk. You should have heard Mrs. de Morville on him! The funny thing is that young Gunton had up the schoolmaster, for caning his little boy, at the previous sessions, and the schoolmaster got off."

"That accounts for old Mr. Gunton's views on schools and the police," I said. "Now I must get back to the 'Rose and Crown'."

CHAPTER XIV

9 P.M.—10.15 P.M.

HAVING crossed the road to the "Rose and Crown" I met the aged Mr. Gunton emerging from the alley which led to the tap-room.

"Good evening again, Mr. Gunton."

"Ah!" he said, "so you have been at the Station, sir, putting the police to rights; and you've not heard anything about the murderer, have you now? I always say if they don't know in the tap-room at the 'Rose and Crown', you need not go to the police."

"Would you advise me to go to the tap-room?"

"No, sir, I wouldn't. They wouldn't talk before a grand-looking gentleman like you—it would not be respectful like. They talks a lot about you, to be sure they do—but, bless you, they don't know nothing. I had to tell 'em all about you myself!"

"After that—it must have been dry work—can I offer you a glass of beer?"

"Thank you kindly, sir, if it would not be presuming. I don't mind if I do."

So I took him into the bar and we had a glass together, and all the time he was peering through the glass into the bar-parlour beyond. "They're bagmen," he said to me contemptuously, nodding at two men on one side of the fireplace. "They all look alike. I don't know who the boy is—a town chap by the cut of him. He comes from London, I guess. Then there's Lawyer Davies. He ain't no good—common, he is, though he sets up for a gentleman like some other folk! That's Mr. Denton

of the big shop. He's a warm man, they say; and there's Mr. Brown from the Manor. You've seen him—he's got his back to us. You won't learn much there, if you sit to closing-time. They'll talk politics and business and such-like trash! They ain't human enough to find a murder interesting, or they're too stuck-up to say so!"

Having so delivered himself, Mr. Gunton again thanked me kindly and departed. He had very little use for anyone or anything that did not belong to the feudal system, and he had evidently a vague respect for Mr. Brown—a gentleman's gentleman, and so distantly connected with it.

He was wrong about the conversation. As I opened the glass door quietly and slowly, Mr. Brown was saying in an overbearing manner to one of the commercial travellers:

"Smart, you say? Don't you believe it! Directly I set eyes on the chap I knew he was a born——"

"May I come in? Have you room for a little one?" I asked. There was an awkward silence, and Mr. Brown did not supply the last word. One or two men got up, and in the shuffle I secured Billy Smith's seat on the settle which seemed the most comfortable. Billy somehow always gets the best place when I am not there, and he is such a simple, unassuming boy.

"Now," said I, smiling at Mr. Brown, "I know whom you were all talking about when I came in, you were talking about—about the lamented Mrs. de Morville."

"We were," said Mr. Denton, with a sigh of relief.

"And I believe Mr. Brown was just developing his views on what really happened, and I should so much like to know what they were."

"What I think," said Mr. Brown, "is neither here nor there. You are, I believe, in charge of the case; but I suppose it would not be professional for you to discuss it?"

"On the contrary, that's what I'm doing all day.

In a multitude of counsellors there is wisdom—there's Bible warrant for that!"

"Well," said one of the travellers, "it would be very interesting to know what you think, though, of course, we know you cannot tell us what clues you are following."

"You see, we detectives form a theory and see if it works. If it doesn't, we try another, and so on." (That isn't the way I work, but it sounded plausible, and that was enough for my audience.) "So you see how useful it is to go about discussing your theories with everyone you meet. The man on the spot can so often tell you at once why they won't work, and then you don't waste your time."

"What I should like to know is about those footprints," asked the lawyer. "That's the one bit of evidence that has as yet transpired."

"There are undoubtedly the footsteps of two men in the shrubbery, and it is, of course, possible that one of them shot the lady—the problem is, how did they get away? They cannot have come into Aldersford. They would have met the Super on his way to The Elms. He is quite clear that he met no unknown man, or anyone who could have done it. They can't have escaped up the Coldmorton Road, for the Super had the Coldmorton police warned long before they could have reached so far. Now it is possible that they escaped up the back drive to the Manor, and went across the park to the Larnham Road."

"They would have had to go through the stable-yard," said Mr. Brown, "and to my knowledge there were two men working there at half-past four."

"There! You see what I told you—how useful it is for a detective to discuss matters openly. I need not waste any more time on that theory!"

Not one of my audience suggested that a murderer does not walk the roads with a label on his back. They all believed, except Billy, that I was talking sense.

"Again," I went on, "it is possible that the

murderer managed to enter the house unperceived, and that Mrs. de Morville was shot from one of the upper windows."

"How could he get in?" asked the solicitor.

"I am not yet sufficiently acquainted with the neighbourhood to know all who may have had access to the house or precincts."

"The real question is," said Mr. Brown, "how, after the murder, he could get out?"

"That is quite easy to explain," said I. "He shot Mrs. de Morville, and a few minutes later the whole household was assembled on the lawn. He counted on that, ran down the back stairs, and disappeared by the back entrance into the road."

"There isn't one," said Mr. Brown. "The back drive joins the front one in full view of the lawn."

"Another theory gone absolutely smash," said I. "See what comes of talking things over with a man so intimately acquainted with the back ways everywhere!"

Mr. Brown glared at me. I saw that a sudden suspicion had crossed his mind that I was pulling his leg. He rose abruptly, wished us "good night", and went out. Billy Smith slipped out at the same time.

"What I want to know," said Mr. Denton, "is why anyone should have wanted to kill the poor lady."

"If I knew that," said I, "the rope would be as good as round the murderer's neck."

"Such an asset to the town," murmured Mr. Denton.

"Yes. She paid you £37 last week."

"How do you know that?"

"It has been my duty to go through her papers."

"And you noticed my little account?"

"Yes. Directly I saw that bill duly receipted, I scratched you off my list of suspected persons."

At this everyone laughed, thinking it a joke, including Mr. Denton, who could not see the point of it.

The lawyer, however, did not like such frivolity, and began heavily: "Mr. Denton is right, the late Mrs. de Morville was an asset to the town. I did not share her political views, nor did I as a rule agree with her plans in matters of local importance, but such disagreements are quite properly buried in the grave. We all have to remember that she did her best, and her good intentions were never called in question."

"Hear, hear!" said one of the Commercials under his breath.

"And I am given to understand," I said, "that the lady was a considerable antiquary?"

"She knew more about my family than anybody," said Mr. Denton. "She was always promising to complete my pedigree."

"I noted a brown paper package among her papers marked 'Denton'," I said, "and another marked 'Gerrans'. You and Sir Walter alike belong to Blankshire."

"And Sir Walter shares the interest," said Mr. Denton. "He, too, is always tracing the connections of the old Blankshire stock."

"I should have thought he had better have left that alone," said the lawyer dryly. "He might make an awkward discovery."

"Oh, that's all nonsense, if you mean the secret marriage."

"I don't know so much about that," said the lawyer. "Of course, everyone in Aldersford knows the story, but it won't be known to the gentlemen here. It's like this: Sir Walter's great-grandfather died about a hundred years ago, some six weeks after his eldest son. The second son succeeded to the estate and baronetcy, but a claimant turned up, in the person of a boy six years old. His mother pleaded that she had been secretly married to the elder son, who had promised to acknowledge her as his wife when his father was dead. Unfortunately, she was unable to produce the marriage certificate—Mr. Gerrans having eloped with her in a post-chaise,

and married her in a village church, of which she did not know the name, a sexton and his wife being the witnesses.

"The court disallowed the claim because her evidence was entirely uncorroborated, but the boy's grandson has been offering a large sum in the newspapers only recently for anyone who will discover the missing certificate."

"The woman, according to what my grandfather told me," said Mr. Denton, "proved to be an impudent hussy who ought to have been sent to prison like Roger Tichborne. I am pretty certain that no discovery will ever be made to cause Sir Walter any trouble."

"Stranger things have happened, if you credit me," said the lawyer.

"I always give you long credit," said Mr. Denton.

"That's because you know the security is good! Mr. Denton is, on the whole, gentlemen, a great believer in the cash system, but he makes exceptions in favour of substantial people, and charges them accordingly."

"You won't get things better in London," said Mr. Denton.

"You might get them cheaper!" said the lawyer.

"And you have not the overhead charges they have in London," said one commercial traveller.

"But, then, you can't expect the same turn-over," said the other.

"That's a very just observation, Mr. Williams. I've had experience in town and country. I have to stock things that sell slowly, and I can't buy in bulk; and Mr. Gordon knows, no one better, that he does not give me the discounts he allows to big London firms."

"Well," said I, "I can bear witness in Mr. Denton's favour. I saw a young man to-day in a pair of smart leather gaiters, and he told me that they were dirt cheap."

"You mean that chauffeur chap at The Elms?"

Well, they were cheap. I lost money over them. You remember, Mr. Gordon," addressing the traveller who had referred to overhead charges, "you over-persuaded me about them. I told you they were no good."

"Well," said I, "they look a deal nicer than those corduroy leggings I wore as a boy. I'm a farmer's son, you know; but there, you don't sell 'em nowadays!"

"Don't I? I sold a pair only last week to that young chap at the Manor, who's under-keeper."

"I've always hated those leggings—the buttons come off. I remember one cold winter's morning putting them on in our kitchen. They were stiff and my fingers were blue, and two buttons came off one after the other, and I said—well, you know what I said as well as if you heard me. My father heard me. He was a very religious man, my father—he never allowed any bad words in his house, and I can tell you I found a new pair of corduroy breeches a very poor protection when my father in his zeal for righteousness got busy with an ash plant! I've hated corduroy leggings ever since. You take care in selling yours, Mr. Denton, that the buttons don't come off, or you may be getting some other poor lad into trouble!"

"Closing time, gentlemen," said the landlady, who entered at that moment attended by Billy Smith, looking like a cat that had had milk.

The lawyer and Mr. Denton departed, and I turned to the first commercial traveller and said: "You all know who I am, Inspector Frost of Scotland Yard. May I ask what you travel in?"

"Haberdashery. I represent Morison and Sons of Manchester."

"And you?" I asked the other.

"Leather."

"Nothing like leather."

"Except haberdashery."

"Can you tell me what you sell buttons like this for?"

"For almost anything—for those leggings you were talking about just now."

"Oh, don't think I have kept that button all these years as a souvenir of that hiding! Now," I went on, turning to Billy, "you, I suppose, are not on the road?"

"I'm on a holiday—motor-cycle."

"Come far to-day?"

"From London."

"Staying long?"

"Don't know."

"Have you a comfortable room?"

"No. 15, if you want to know," said Billy irritably, and he got up and walked out.

"I am afraid I ask too many questions," I remarked to the other two men. "It's a fault we detectives fall into. Can't help it. Now what do you suppose that young fellow is?"

"A 'varsity man," hazarded one of them.

"No, if he were, he would not be sporting a Guards tie."

"I did not know it was a Guards tie."

"Neither does he. If he were a 'varsity man he would not wear it."

"Perhaps he's a bank clerk."

"It's too near quarter day for him to be having a holiday."

"Well, what do you think?"

"I should guess he was some sort of lawyer's clerk. September's a slack month for them—the courts are not sitting. You ask him to-morrow. I should be glad to know if I were right."

With that I rose and disappeared hurriedly. Through the glass I saw Harry Holloway and his two friends being let in. They had taken my advice and spent the evening in different pubs, and I could wait for their intelligence until the morning. I went upstairs to No. 16.

CHAPTER XV

10.15 P.M.—11 P.M.

I ONLY looked into my sitting-room to see that they had lighted the fire I had ordered, for even in a warm September it is pleasant to sit by the fire before going to bed. Then I went to the stuffy room at the back, took off some of my clothes and returned quite comfortable in a dressing-gown and slippers.

From the next room I heard stamp, stamp, stamp. It was a noise that ought to be stopped, so I unlocked the connecting door, withdrew the bolts which were on my side, and I looked in to see Billy in a state of nudity doing physical jerks.

"Billy, I'm ashamed of you, disturbing a respectable middle-aged pacifist at this time of night, by noises that remind him he belongs to a militarist state. When you've covered your nakedness, you may come into my room and offer the necessary explanations and apologies."

Two minutes later he appeared in pyjamas, a mackintosh, and felt slippers.

"You need not stand at attention. It makes you look ridiculous in that rig. You may sit down in that chair, and if you have been a good boy you may smoke."

I may here remind you that I have known Billy from a baby and have trained him carefully since he joined the Force. His father, a greengrocer in Clapham, is my oldest friend, for we were boys in the same village. Even my wife and daughters approve of Billy, though they won't come with me to visit his parents, because the Smiths are not our class,

"Now, Billy, I saw you arriving a good hour after I told you; and I am afraid you have not seen the church."

"On the other hand, sir, I arrived a quarter of an hour too soon. I had tea and saw the church. The church did not take five minutes. Then I took a little spin up the Coldmorton road and back."

"You wanted to see where The Elms was, and haven't I impressed on you that you are articled clerk of Williamson and Evans, in Southampton Row—a firm only interested in tin boxes—and you ought not to take a morbid interest in crime?"

"I don't think you mentioned the limitations of the firm's practice."

"Perhaps I didn't. Have you told the landlady who you are?"

"Vaguely, more or less."

"And have you told her about your passion for Early English architecture?"

"I did try it on a bit."

"And what did she say?"

"She said she saw that I had been going in for an exam., for her daughter, who is a teacher, used to talk like that."

"Billy, you're no good! Now you know a little of the lingo don't use too much of it. You restrict yourself to taking photographs and having them developed by the chemist down the street."

"I prefer to develop them myself."

"No doubt you do, but you aren't here except on business, and that's why your holiday character must be established. What else did that old woman tell you?"

"She said how glad she was you hadn't taken that nice bedroom."

"Why is she glad? I'm not! Did she tell you anything about the murder?"

"Nothing, and you told me not to ask. She's much more interested in me. I remind her of the son in Canada, just my age and almost as good-looking. We had a nice little chat at tea-time, and

another chat when I came back from my spin, and I've spent a jolly half-hour with her in a cosy little room at the back in a comfortable chair by the fire. I was glad, sir, that you took my seat on the settle. And we've had a glass of cherry brandy apiece out of her own special bottle. She's a very nice motherly body, and she came upstairs herself to see if I was comfortable and had enough blankets."

"You are, Billy, the cheekiest little Cockney I've struck; and why do you suppose that a prodigal Government pays you, and what have you done to earn bread and butter, leave out cherry brandy, to-day?"

"Well! There's the butler fellow from the Manor. He fairly held the floor before you arrived."

"I think he was calling me a 'born fool' as I came in. It is wonderful how soon I have established a reputation in Aldersford. I have always found that horseshoe pin and big gold watch-chain made high-brows underrate my ability."

"I don't believe he is quite sure in himself that you are such a fool after all. I followed him out; and, as we were parting, I asked, 'And what do you think of that Inspector's theories now you've heard him?' And he said, 'He was talking through his hat,' but it did just strike me that he hoped to drive us in blinkers!"

"That settles it," said I. "You mark my words—I am not the first man from Scotland Yard he has been up against. Did he say what happened at the Manor to illustrate my folly? He didn't! Now that's funny!"

"He did say what Sir Walter called you."

"What was it? Out with it. I particularly want to know."

"He told us Sir Walter said you were a flabby Bounder with a squint."

"He's a liar, Billy. Sir Walter may have called me a Bounder, I expect he did. I wasn't born and bred a gentleman, I don't pretend to be one, except

in Brixton to oblige my wife. I don't myself believe that a real gentleman would make a very good detective. But Sir Walter's a thorough sportsman. He has an eye for a man and a beast. He never called me flabby—I am sure of that. Sir Walter's also a gentleman and I hope he did not so far forget himself as to mention the very slight cast in my left eye—but one never knows! Now, had your precious butler any theory to offer about the crime?"

"He told us that the Squire's son had a rifle, and he went on to say that he did not hold with kids being trusted with firearms. He said the boy was really dangerous in the way he went potting at things. He wouldn't be at all surprised if Mrs. de Morville died from an accident—but, if so, he supposed it would all be hushed up."

"Oh! did the loyal retainer of the Gerrans family say all that? It is odd that the gardener at The Elms tried to make me believe the same thing. That's two of them, Billy."

"But you weren't taking any?"

"Well, Billy, it's hard to believe that even the naughtiest little boy can shoot an old lady with a gun he has not got, through a gap that isn't there. No! what's puzzling me is, what prank that young gentleman has played on Mr. Brown, who does not strike me as inviting a practical joke, and who would certainly have gone to Sir Walter had one been played on him. I know about the chauffeur. Didn't he confess that the boy had given him some of his lip! What do you suggest?"

"I am only wondering which you really suspect, the chauffeur or the butler!"

"Billy, we are told not to think evil of our neighbours. That is a command which in my profession I cannot obey. But I don't speak evil about my neighbours. At least, not until I have them under lock and key. Now, Billy, that you have told me how scandalously you have been wasting your time, I will let you know how strenuous I have been."

I proceeded to give him an account of my activities and what I had learnt, and then went on :

"To-morrow you are going to be likewise employed. You are going to get up at six a.m. like the early worm and wriggle your way over to Sandhurst. They are accustomed to early hours there. You will be in your bedroom and report at eleven. While we are all at the inquest to-morrow you will be at The Elms. I have arranged with cook about the key.

"You will then go to Coldmorton and photograph its very interesting church—several photos, Billy, but don't be too long about it. You will turn off the road on your way home and see the somewhat less interesting church at Badenham, and have a simple tea at the 'Cross'—that's where Harriet comes from. And I may find other little jobs for you in your vacant hours."

"Now, what exactly do you want me to do at Sandhurst?"

"You will arrive about breakfast time and send in your name as Detective Smith from Scotland Yard, and ask to see the captain of Mr. Steel's company. You will tell him of Mrs. de Morville's murder and that the Yard are investigating. You will say that the family had expected Mr. Steel to arrive at Aldersford on Monday night, and that at noon yesterday they had received a report from the man on the spot that he had not yet come. Scotland Yard does not for a moment think there is anything suspicious in this, but the method of the Yard is to account for everyone connected with a mystery. Have you got that down? You may pick up any casual information about young Steel, but don't go asking too many questions. See! And don't wear that Guards tie—you may find someone at Sandhurst better entitled to it!"

"I didn't know!"

"Of course you didn't. Scouts ought to receive a badge for knowing all the more important sporting

colours. You get them up. It'll be useful information that you won't misuse. It's not like the stuff you cram for an examination and discharge as soon as you conveniently can! Now go to bed."

As Billy reached the door, I called after him. "Billy, if I were you I should not kiss that chambermaid any more, your motherly old friend downstairs wouldn't like it."

"How did you know?"

"I didn't, Billy; I guessed. As I met the young woman in the passage on my way to lunch she somehow or other suggested kissing. Being a respectable married man with a family, I resisted the temptation; but I somehow didn't think you would!"

Billy closed the door. I locked and bolted it. Then I wrote a short note to Mr. Charles Steel suggesting that he should call on me at eleven-thirty as there were some things I wanted to know, and I was very unwilling at such a time to trouble his aunt.

Having done this, I went back to my stuffy bedroom and, finding no extra blankets, went to sleep with my top-coat and dressing-gown both on the bed. How true it is, "Youth must be served".

PART TWO

Wednesday, September 23rd, 1924

CHAPTER I

6 A.M.—7.30 A.M.

SOME detectives after a long day sit up half the night over their notes and reports. I slip into bed, sleep on my experience and have a great belief in unconscious cerebration. Fat men like me bounce out of bed early in the morning, thin people like Billy Smith slither out of bed at a later hour. It was only because I was up and alive at six that Billy started for Sandhurst at six-forty-five. Lazy young hound!

I sat down to review yesterday's work and wrote out conversations in full. I have an excellent verbal memory. Some people will tell you that everything depends on how a thing is said. It is much more important for a detective to mark the words actually uttered. The expression conveys what witnesses want you to believe, the words are often the clue to what happened. Again, cook taught me a good deal, but a précis of cook would not be important. A précis is a mistake—the important thing is often that which slips out in parenthesis.

Some months ago I was questioning a lady about her movements. She described how she had visited Hatchard's and then went by Vigo Street to Liberty's. Why by Vigo Street? Some would have noted down "first Hatchard's, then Liberty's". Next day questioning another person, he quite as unnecessarily mentioned Vigo Street, and Vigo Street provided the clue to the mystery. It was one of my brilliant exposures.

I don't forget that Mr. Brown knew that there were two men in the stable yard on Monday

afternoon at half-past four. It looks as if he had himself passed by that way. And why did Gunton send that message to Brown? These are small matters, and I need not record here my notes in full—only a few of them are of importance.

I. *Miss Courtland* tried to convince me that the murderer was a homicidal maniac. Is she convinced herself that this is the most probable explanation, or is she secretly afraid of some family skeleton being dug up? Anyhow, I should like to know more about that brother.

II. *The Footprints*.—Two men have been in the shrubbery; but, if Mrs. de Morville was shot from there, the murderer must have gone away before the second man came along, as his footprints were all superimposed. No second man, seeing as he must have done the dead body on the lawn, would have gone just a little way into the shrubbery that I might measure his footprints. The only possible explanation would be, that the first man's footprints had nothing to do with the murder, and that the second man shot Mrs. de Morville from the drive but retired into the shrubbery to hide for a moment from someone (George Stevens?) who approached. It isn't, however, likely.

III. *The Window*.—If Mrs. de Morville was not shot from the shrubbery, nor from the entrance to the kitchen garden by George Stevens, she must have been shot from the house. I confess to being intrigued by that flapping window, which nobody opened, on the second story above the front door. It must be remembered that the body was found some 12 ft. from the chair where Mrs. de Morville had been sitting. Did she see somebody at the window and rise hurriedly to go into the house?

Remember that Miss Courtland says her blinds were drawn down.

IV. *The Discovery*.—What was it? Lawyer Davies would 'no doubt conclude it was the missing marriage certificate, which might provide a motive for the crime, if Mrs. de Morville had evidence which could be destroyed. But it is clear that Sir Walter did not receive the note about the discovery until after the lady was dead. He may, however, have had reason to know from the line of Mrs. de Morville's researches that discovery was imminent. When did Mrs. de Morville make the discovery? She had evidently not made it the previous evening when Sir Walter called; and if she had received it by the morning's post, I do not think she would have delayed until four o'clock to write that note. It is unlikely that she discovered anything on the morning walk to Elsie's mother. A piece of local gossip, heard in the street which concerned Sir Walter, would be in everyone's mouth by now. She took in the afternoon post herself; and I have no doubt that in some letter, she learnt something which she wished to communicate at once to Sir Walter. She wrote accordingly the note, and suggested the time when he was most likely to be at home.

What did Mrs. de Morville do with the letter? She undoubtedly put it into her handbag. She was going to take it up to Sir Walter directly she had had her tea. We shall soon know what the discovery was.

V. *The Rifle*.—Of course, the rifle was lost, and I expect that scatterbrained boy left it where he thought he did. Left at a bathing place, I should not expect to find it after two days; but in a town where everyone and everything is known, I should have guessed that nine out of ten people would have returned it to the Manor

and received a reward. It would not have been safe to use; and, as the boy's name had been engraved on the stock, there would have been difficulties in selling it. The question is, Who found it? It is pure assumption, of course, to say that Mrs. de Morville was killed by this particular rifle, though it seems probable. If Brown is to be believed it was found the morning after the murder behind the back door, and Stevens and Milward had both been there shortly after the murder. But is Brown to be believed?

Note Brown's malevolence towards Dick. The disgraceful condition of the rifle, and Sir Walter's orders that the boy himself was to keep it clean. Note also his insinuation last night as reported by Billy.

VI. *The Three Envelopes*.—Are suggestive of a clandestine correspondence between someone at The Elms and someone at the Manor. The broken paling was just opposite to The Elms gate, and the path through the plantation was well trodden. I cannot imagine cook or Harriet being guilty of any indiscretion, and Elsie's young man is well known. Is one of the maids at the Manor receiving the love letters of George Stevens; or is there some confederacy between Brown and Stevens; and if so, what can they be up to?

Such are my notes on Tuesday morning, and I have yet to discover about that blank counter-foil, and Charlie Steel's delayed arrival, and why Sir Walter's watch is a quarter of an hour wrong.

There is plenty for me and Billy to do to-day, and probably there will be another batch of little mysteries to-morrow.

It is strange that in a place like Aldersford there should be any secrets, because most people mind

their neighbours' business. Yet in one afternoon and evening I have found several facts calling aloud for an explanation, and it is quite possible that none of them have any relation to the central mystery—Who shot Mrs. de Morville?

CHAPTER II

7.30 A.M.—8.15 A.M.

"You are up early," said Harry Holloway as I entered the coffee-room.

"I have been up and at work for an hour and a half," said I.

"Writing out a statement to be handed to the Press?"

"No, examining certain fragments of a jigsaw puzzle, and wondering what the picture is like to which they belong."

"Can we help you?" asked the red-haired Scot.

"Yes, to some of that bacon, but to nothing else. The fragments may belong to another jigsaw for all I know, and have got into the wrong box. Now tell me, what did the pot-valiant citizens of Aldersford proclaim in your respective pubs last night?"

"They all knew that you were not in uniform, and they were mostly sure that you were no good. You have been a long time at The Elms—as if the murderer were likely to remain there!—and you have been to the Manor to ask Sir Walter's help, and that is the only sensible thing you have done."

"Thank you! Well, you know the limit of my incompetence since you helped me so much in that Lincoln business. Now, tell me what they said about the crime."

"Well, several of them remembered having seen on the road during the last three months villainous tramps who looked as if they would like to have the chance of murdering a rich old lady; and one of them distinctly remembers that one day last week—he could not call to mind which day—he had seen

a tramp come out of the drive with a can in his hand."

"And tea inside it, I suppose! Went to beg for a little water and had tea thrown in by the cook. You haven't seen the cook. I should imagine that gate was well known to gentlemen regularly on the road."

"But," said the Scot eagerly, "the prevalent opinion is that the chauffeur is a Bolshie in disguise, and that the Soviet have sent him to Aldersford to kill Mrs. de Morville, who was president of the Women's Conservative Association."

"Is that going into your paper?"

"I think not. It would be libellous and the man might get damages."

"Well, one good turn deserves another. At the 'Rose and Crown' it was suggested that the Squire's son, aged thirteen, being unable to hit a rabbit, shot Mrs. de Morville, she providing a larger mark."

"I don't think I shall print that either," said the wise young Scot.

"Now I have seen both the boy and the Bolshie, and I can assure you that the boy did not shoot the lady."

"And the Bolshie?"

"Refuses to commit himself. He knows too much about the secret police. I will tell you what—why shouldn't you bright young men go and interview him?"

"If you didn't get anything out of him——" Harry hesitated.

"The secret police don't pay for early and exclusive information."

"Is it worth it?"

"I should think not, but you might."

Just at that moment the one waiter of the hotel brought in the one *Daily Intelligence* for which the management subscribed. Four hands shot out for it, but mine was the largest hand, and mine the most compelling eye. The waiter surrendered it to me, and I explained to the others;

" Harry wrote it and cannot want to see it again ! You two detest the rag of a hated rival, and wonder why people read it. I revel in it, because Harry's style impresses me so much ; and I like the paper especially this morning because it has a speaking likeness of myself. Yes, and two other pictures—a view of a black dress in motion and a black helmet hat labelled Miss Courtland, and a view of The Elms not quite straight—The Stricken House Be-autiful !

" Now you two boys, sit up and take notice : Harry has filled two and a half columns with what everyone knows and what he himself imagines. I need not read you the eulogistic account of Mrs. de Morville's career, of how she was an anti-suffragette to the very last, and recorded her vote on the first opportunity. Of how she was the magistrate before whom the most hardened trembled, and the kindly benefactress of the frail and those in trouble.

" We will pass over the description of the house and garden—it is paradise *ad lib.* And then—'into this haven of tranquillity which two good and beautiful women had made the centre of a wide beneficence, the stealthy murderer crept'. But, wait a bit. 'He left his sinister footprints in the dark shrubbery. They were found and will prove his doom—the sleuth-hounds of Scotland Yard are now upon his track'. I'm the dog he alludes to in the plural. Yes, here I am accurately described—'Inspector Frost, C.I.D., in charge of the case, is perhaps more brilliant than any other detective in his diagnosis of a mystery and in his detection of a criminal'. Harry, my boy, you are really quite nice. My younger daughter will treasure that in her album of Press cuttings. It will be, therefore, remembered long after the public has altogether forgotten the de Morville murder.

" 'In a short interview, which the busy inspector most kindly accorded me, I was assured that there were plenty of clues and at least a dozen suspected persons. They are being diligently followed by the

active local police under the direction of Superintendent Thomas, whose prompt arrival on the scene of the crime, and rapid decision to secure the services of Scotland Yard, have won him the approbation of his fellow townsmen'.

"My dear Harry, you know how he hated having to call us in—but there, I don't grudge him that pat of butter. He's a first-rate man in his own line and he has been jolly good to me.

"'Everyone in Aldersford is eagerly awaiting the inquest which will be held to-day, when startling disclosures are expected'. Alas, Harry, everyone in Aldersford will be disappointed!

"That and much more, which I have omitted to read, fill nearly one and a half columns. Then with special headlines we read—*Interview with Miss Courtland*. Now listen—you boys haven't got this. 'In a drawing-room, decorated in the most refined taste, Miss Courtland received me very graciously and forgave my intrusion'—(You hopeful young man!) 'She told me how great had been the shock, how inexplicable was the mystery, how none but a homicidal maniac would have attacked her sister'. I say, Harry, is that bit about a homicidal maniac hers or yours? Oh, hers, of course. Is it? Where are we? Here we are: 'As she courteously wished me good-bye, she hoped that I should receive ample information from those authorities who were competent to supply me with relevant details which a heart-broken woman could not keep in mind'. In other words, she said—'Get out; and, if you want to know any more, ask a policeman.'—She didn't, you say?—You're right, Miss Courtland could not be so vulgar, but I imagine she gave you to understand that. Now I hope you two boys in your respective organs of public opinion have given the same prominence to this paragraph:

The police would welcome any intelligence about a middle-aged gentleman, who was walking between Coldmorton and Aldersford on

Monday afternoon. He was of medium height, had blue eyes, a closely clipped moustache and a military appearance. He was dressed in a cloth cap, a loose tweed coat, plus-fours and brogues.

"Might not that description fit dozens of other people?" asked the Scot.

"It might. You come from near St. Andrews, don't you? And you know."

"But then!"

"But then, my boy, I am only anxious to see one of them."

"And then?"

With portentous gravity I closed the conversation. "And then, it is just possible—I will say no more—the key to the mystery may be found at Coldmorton."

CHAPTER III

8.30 A.M.—9.30 A.M.

AT ten minutes to nine o'clock I happened to be loafing with a pipe in my mouth before the "Rose and Crown", and from time to time I glanced at the Bank opposite with its blinds down and its door shut fast. The door had a notice stating it would be open from nine-thirty to three.

It was just then that I saw a little round man, walking with short steps very fast, and I crossed the road so as to meet him as he was inserting the key in the lock.

"I want to see Mr. Fulton, the manager of the Bank."

"The Bank does not open until nine-thirty. If you call then—"

"I am Inspector Frost, of Scotland Yard, and I wish to ask some important questions relative to the sad occurrence at The Elms; and I thought it would perhaps be more convenient if I saw you before the Bank opened."

"Certainly you may."

The little man's countenance changed. He beamed upon me through his gold-rimmed glasses like an excited child. He almost pulled me in, and pushed me through the glass swing-doors into the darkened bank. The outer door closed with a bang. We were alone.

"Come straight in. There's nobody about and I don't think your entrance can have been noticed. We shall be quite private in my room. Neither of my staff come a moment before they have to. I expect them at nine-twenty. I can let you out by

the back way into the lane if you like. Nobody need even know that you have been with me."

By this time we had entered the little dark room, which looked with its expensive mahogany fittings as if it were expressly designed for the discomfort of creditors. I could not help sympathising with the manager, who, doomed to live with this solid rectangular furniture, retained a craving for romance.

"I have only a few confidential inquiries to make, and you will understand how hard it is to find out things at The Elms."

"Indeed I do! I was round there last night. I wanted to see those footprints everyone is talking about—who knows that even I might not have had an idea?—but a very stupid constable in plain clothes would not even allow me within the gate, and did not seem to understand what I meant in saying the two ladies were my clients. So I tried to survey the premises from outside, but half-way down the holly hedge I met Farmer Grimes, who asked me if I couldn't read the notice—'Trespassers will be prosecuted'. I asked him how much longer he would require that overdraft? Rather smart of me, wasn't it? Came to me on the spur of the moment. Dried him up! So I went right round at the back, and I am quite sure that no one could have climbed that brick wall without a ladder, though Mr. Denton told me, as I was coming into town, that you rather think the murderer must have escaped that way."

"But I always defer to intelligent local opinion—I go about collecting it and it is most useful. But now I must come to my inquiry. Am I wrong in supposing that you have recently cashed a cheque on Mrs. de Morville's account for a considerable amount?"

"There now! Of course, we bankers never say a word about our clients' affairs; but I could not help saying to my wife in bed last night—'Mark my words, that cheque has something to do with the murder'. For Mrs. de Morville—and we bankers know our clients' habits—it was so very unusual."

"How much was the cheque for, and who cashed it?"

"Mrs. de Morville cashed it herself. She came into the Bank on Monday morning. It was about eleven, and I was in the outer office. She handed in a cheque for five pounds as usual and then another for £100; and she took the money in Treasury Notes.

"She put a rubber-band round them; and I can see her now snapping her handbag. I thought it odd at the time; and, when I heard the news of the murder, I said: 'You see, it's a clear case of black-mail'."

"When a blackmailer has an old goose on a string and she has just laid a golden egg, he does not usually murder her. He expects her to lay another."

"Yes! Now that's very sensible—very well put indeed. I must remember that—though, mind you, there was nothing of the old goose about Mrs. de Morville—sound business woman she was. Now do you think it was robbery?"

"Who was in the Bank at the time?"

"No one but the staff. That is how I came to have a few words with the lady while the cashier was counting the notes. I thought the poor lady might have said something, but she didn't."

"Well, I gather Mrs. de Morville was not the sort of lady who went out into the street and told people, 'I have £100 in my bag'. We have no reason for supposing that anyone knew that she had it, and I have heard nothing at The Elms of its being missed."

"Then how did you know she had cashed the cheque?"

"That was one of my brilliant inspirations! I have them sometimes. Now, I know it is very unprofessional, and your clerks may be here in five minutes, but might I look at your books a minute?"

"Well, there can't be any harm in it, and you represent the law."

"Yes, I could get an order for an inspection, but it would save time."

"Of course it would; just come this way."

I found Mrs. de Morville had a credit balance of £523 and Miss Courtland one of £165. I also noted that Miss Courtland paid her sister £50 each quarter day; and I could not help thinking that, if this was her contribution, she certainly had her money's worth.

"Did Mrs. de Morville always keep so large a balance?"

"She was very methodical. At the beginning of every year she reduced her balance to about £200 and invested the remainder. Mrs. de Morville has been investing money to my knowledge for the last twenty years, and her savings must be very considerable."

"Is Miss Courtland equally careful?"

"I should say she was. She has been pretty regular in buying a £100 or £200 pounds of stock, and she has sometimes condescended to ask my advice. Mrs. de Morville never did."

"Well, I have taken up your time and prevented you dealing with your letters before the Bank opened. You will, of course, regard our conversation as strictly confidential. After all, I had not obtained an order to inspect, so technically speaking you ought not to have given me this exceedingly useful information."

"You really think it may be useful in bringing the criminal to justice. I hope—Yes! I see it would not do for me to give evidence at the inquest."

"Certainly not. You have only to be very careful to tell nobody what you have told me. You and I, Mr. Fulton, are fellow-conspirators, but in the cause of justice; and we can both keep our own counsel—Bankers and detectives have their reputations to maintain."

Outside the Bank, I found the red-haired young Scot hanging about.

"Wanting some money?" I remarked. "The Bank will be open in five minutes."

"You seem to have been there already."

"Yes; you see I had to arrange about a Government draft—met Mr. Fulton outside; and he, on learning how busy I am, did my business at once."

I think I may certainly reckon on Fulton not telling anyone anything—until he goes home to his lunch. And I am sure he is now so enjoying his secrets that he won't part with a tittle of them to that journalist.

CHAPTER IV

9.30 A.M.—10 A.M.

LEAVING the Bank, I strolled out of the town, crossed the stile into the Town Meadows, and pursued the track which led to the bathing place. I wanted to examine the place where Master Dick had left his rifle.

On coming to the spot, I noted a little pile of clothes by a pollarded willow, and, as I reached it, there was a boy in the water. It was just my luck. The boy was Dick Gerrans.

"Hullo!" I said.

He made no reply, but turning on his left side proceeded to swim up-stream. I sat down close to his clothes and waited. I had to wait some time, and the boy looked blue and cold as he scrambled up the bank. He had stayed too long in the water.

"Good morning," I said. "I thought it was you."

"My father does not wish me to have anything to do with you, unless he is there."

"Your father must know that it is often my painful duty to thrust my acquaintance on people who do not want me."

"Do you mind going away, please? I want to dress."

Poor little chap, he was shivering!

"You can dress all right with me here, and then we can talk. Here's your towel—catch!"

The boy seized the towel and promptly turned his back to show that he did not mean to have anything to do with me. He also unwittingly showed me that he had been caned very recently—and caned with a

severity which would have done credit to my own dear dad.

"Here's your shirt," said I, thrusting it towards him, "cover yourself up. And here are your knickers. You are quite right, you can't chat comfortably while your teeth are chattering."

Still the boy said nothing.

"Here's one stocking and here's the other. I say, when you clambered up that bank on Monday after hearing the shot, what did you see?"

"How do you know I clambered up the bank?"

"What size boots do you wear? Look at them, here's one and here's the other"—and I threw them towards him. The boy's face was getting red with anger as he laced up his boots.

"Well, you needn't tell me, for I know. You saw that gardener chap running for dear life away from the gate into the front garden."

"Then you're wrong—He was running towards it."

"Thank you, Master Dick. That's what I wanted to know, and what you've told me may save a man from hanging. It was good of you to speak. Now, you've disobeyed your father by talking to me, but if I were you I should go straight home and tell him all about it. He's certain to find out, and you are in no condition to stand another whipping."

The boy faced me. He had blushed to the roots of his hair. He said:

"It's no business of yours."

"No, I am a detective; I am not an inspector employed by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. If I had been, I should have had a fine case of a cruel father beating his innocent child."

"How dare you speak of my father like that! He was quite right! He was jolly decent about it, too. So that's all you know about it! You—you cad!"

For a minute I really thought the enraged little turkey-cock would have come for me, but he

suddenly turned round and began running up the track towards the stile. He did not follow the direct way home.

Well, the boy's about right. I have been a cad to tease him like that, but I learnt a very important fact. Now I wonder why he was caned? Was it for that lie—it was palpable enough, but Sir Walter did not take any notice; or was it for not reporting the loss of his rifle—that did seem to annoy his father; or was it for one of his hundred and one other misdeeds that I know nothing about?

CHAPTER V

10 A.M.—10.30 A.M.

WHEN the boy had gone I remembered that I had not come there to find him. I guessed that as Dick bathed frequently, he probably always undressed at the same spot. Such actions become automatic. Now his clothes had been lying just on the ledge of the bank which was broken away and so provided steps down to the water. On that side the trunk of the willow was smooth and round, and the break of the bank made it impossible to prop up a stick, leave out a rifle; I walked round. On the other side the tree was gnarled and the trunk grooved. I stood my stick up and looked at it. That was exactly where I should have put the rifle. I went back to the spot where Dick's clothes had been. The stick was out of sight. "There," said I, "it is quite intelligible how a young man, late for his tea, forgot it. Sir Walter, even if his watch is wrong, is exact and insists on punctuality."

Then I knelt down to examine the ground. I did not expect to find anything. I did it from habit; it was in accordance with those habits of thoroughness in which I have been trained. I did find something, a most unexpected thing—a little hairpin, and a copper hairpin at that. I looked at it carefully and then put it into my pocket. *Cherchez la femme*, I said to myself. That is one of the very few French phrases I know.

Slowly, I walked back to Aldersford and went straight into Denton's shop. Behind one of the counters stood a peroxide beauty with bobbed hair. I approached her and said: "Hairpins, please."

My request took her breath away, but I smiled at her and said, "Hairpins, yes—now don't be alarmed. All your nicest hairpins, and I'll tell you all about it. First, you must know I don't want them for myself. I am Inspector Frost and I have been sent down here to conduct an inquiry. I am always being sent to different parts of the country to conduct inquiries, and I have a little daughter at home, who insists on my bringing to her some curio from the place where I have been. I do it, for it ensures that she looks eagerly for my return. Now, Aldersford is so very old-fashioned that it has not even an old curiosity shop, and I lay awake last night trying to think of what I could take my daughter; and then, suddenly I had an inspiration—I would take her a packet of hairpins. Not that she has any use for such things. My daughter is ultra-modern and has an Eton crop, but I have noted that in this old-world place, only the very pretty and progressive ladies have cut their hair.

"Hairpins are in consequence symbolical of Aldersford. I will give her hairpins to add to her collection of china monsters and relics of the ages of barbarism. In days to come she will take the packet from the cabinet and say: 'These are the strange implements by which the Victorians secured their superfluous tresses'. Isn't it a good idea?

"Now, here is a drawer full of hairpins, which do you advise? These big, brutal and uncompromising prongs—I remember the far-off days when I would borrow one of them from my wife to stick into my pipe: they have a sentimental value for me—or these smaller ones. Are they more genteel? And here are some with little spirals. Ah! I suppose hairpins have evolved like all else. And these little copper-coloured ones are very pretty. I like them best of all. Are they all the same price?"

"The copper ones are threepence dearer than the others."

"Ah, I see! even in hairpins there are class

distinctions, and beautiful ladies pay threepence more than ordinary folks."

"Don't know about that. The vicar's wife bought some of these little black ones only yesterday, and Mrs. de Morville always preferred the big ones."

"What, the poor lady who was murdered? And she a widow with no husband to borrow them for his pipe! And here are these pretty and expensive trifles which have taken my fancy lying neglected—no one but a mere man will buy them. No one else can afford them."

"Well, they don't sell much. If you want to know, the last packet I sold was to The Elms parlourmaid."

"There now, what a topsy-turvy world we do live in, to be sure! The maid pays threepence more for her hairpins than her mistress. I must tell my daughter that. Aldersford is after all creeping on towards true democratic ideals."

"Am I going to buy them? Of course I am. I would not disappoint my daughter for the sake of threepence. Please wrap them up in a nice piece of paper, and there's the money. Now, what would you say if I gave you a packet of hairpins for a present?"

"I would stick them into you."

"Yes, my dear, I can see you doing it, but then you have not been brought up like my daughter. She has been brought up to reverence her father."

CHAPTER VI

10.30 A.M.—11.30 A.M.

LEAVING Denton's, I returned to the "Rose and Crown", and met the landlady in the passage. I just stopped to make a complaint against the young man in No. 15. He was doing physical exercises last night, stamping and making such a noise that I could not get on with my work.

"You ought to have taken that bedroom yourself, and then you could have been as quiet as you like."

"Perhaps I did make a mistake. Do you think the young man would like to change?"

"I'm sure he wouldn't, and why should he?"

"Well, you tell him, with my compliments, to be a little less noisy."

With that I went upstairs and entered the room, leaving the door slightly open. I went to the window and looked out, but I was well aware of the fact that the chambermaid was taking a peep at me. She was interested in detectives, and I knew that she had gone through such of my belongings as I had not locked up.

Across the way I saw Sir Walter coming out of the Bank, and wondered if the manager had been able to refrain from discussing the cheque with such a very distinguished client. Then I saw the red-headed Scot coming out of Denton's. So he was still watching me, and I wondered again what he would make of those hairpins.

There was a little group of gentlemen on the dole loafing in front of the "Lamb and Flag", and they began to take interest when a motor drove by and deposited a dignified old fellow at the police station.

I should not mind betting that he was the Coroner come to see if all was ready for the inquest. The inquest was to take place in the Court of Petty Sessions after the jury had viewed the body at The Elms. At length up the street came Billy Smith on his motor-cycle, much too fast as usual. He stood it up near the porch; and I retreated to my door to hear the landlady telling him how that crabbed detective objected to noise and wanted to have his bedroom.

"Well, he just won't," said Billy. "And as for the noise, you can tell him to lump it."

Billy, I fear, is a most inconsiderate young man, but I unlocked the door to the adjoining room, while he was running noisily upstairs, and before I could withdraw the bolts he had slammed his own door as if in protest of my complaint. It gave me an excuse of opening my own door into the passage and asking querulously, "What's the matter?" As the chambermaid did not appear in answer, I imagined that her work had called her elsewhere.

"Billy," I said, "you are an impudent young dog, but you have returned five minutes before your time, and I hope that does not mean you have exceeded the speed limit."

"Not half!" said Billy. "But all is well."

"Then just report, for there is not too much time before Mr. Charles Steel arrives. I have locked the door and will sit in the window to watch for his approach. You had better lock your own door and sit over there."

So Billy began his tale.

"I arrived, according to instructions, at Sandhurst, inquired which company Mr. Steel belonged to, and then sent in my card to Captain Dolman, who commanded it. He was none too pleased to be disturbed at his breakfast, and was evidently disappointed at my youth, for he referred to it more than once. He evidently thought a detective ought to be like Sherlock Holmes in the *Strand Magazine*,

He was quite civil, and quite understood that the inquiry was a mere formality. Mr. Steel has evidently the right sort of character to appeal to a military man with athletic interests. Nothing against him but an occasional rag. He was having a tooth stopped before he returned to Sandhurst, the temporary stopping had to be replaced, and it was to visit his dentist that he went to London on Monday. He went up on a motor bike, and coming back unfortunately had a crash some five miles from the college and was late. He reported the crash and his aunt's death about ten o'clock on Monday night, obtained leave of absence, and left by an early train on Tuesday morning."

"H'm! That all? It does not get us much further. I see, Billy, you are keeping something back. You know a report of that sort is of no manner of value."

"Well, I liked Captain Dolman, and he was so pleased with himself. He said, with a wink: 'I satisfied myself that there was a dentist and a crash. In a command of this kind we have to employ the methods of detectives. Dentists provide well-known excuses, and accidents on the road are sometimes designed'.

"With that he produced a letter from a Mr. Strong in Wigmore Street, stating that he could see Mr. Steel on Monday and finish the stopping if he could attend at eleven and four. An immediate answer would oblige.

"Captain Dolman smiled at me and I smiled at him, for it was quite obvious that Mr. Steel had altered an 'or' into an 'and' and so secured a whole day's leave.—Oh, no, I did not give him away. I only regretted that my Inspector was not to be so easily deceived. He then showed me a wire from the garage, and so put me wise as to where it was. He made a few inquiries about the de Morville murder; and I answered with the professional reserve which characterizes our department. Don't laugh, sir! I really am learning the manner which the public

expects. Practice it before the glass in the intervals of stamping. It does not annoy elderly gentlemen with nerves."

"Any more of your cheek, Billy, and I will smack your head as I used to do when you were a kid. Do you remember?"

"I remember you did not do it very hard."

"One of the few mistakes I have made in life. Now get on, we have only some quarter of an hour."

"I talked to the old sergeant going out. A jolly old boy. He knew Mr. Steel well—knew his father too, had served under him in India. The son was all right, the very spit of his father as a young man. It was a bad business about his aunt. He hoped it would not keep the young gentleman away long. He did hear that they expected great things from him at Rugger. He had come from Wellington with a tremendous reputation as a stand-off half."

"Now that interests you a great deal more than me. What did you learn of importance?"

"I learnt that Mr. Steel had left his overalls as well as his smashed cycle at the garage, and that gave me an idea."

"Get along!"

"Though I don't know a Guards tie when I see it, I satisfied the man at the garage that I was a gentleman-cadet who had come over to look at Mr. Steel's bike and to get something he had left in his overalls. My! it must have been a smash! I can't think why he wasn't hurt. He ought to have been killed, but apparently he was pitched into a muddy ditch.—Well, I am hurrying along as fast as I can. I thought you liked details.—I found in the overalls this letter, and I thought you would like to see it. So I brought it along."

"Billy! And you brought up in a lawyer's office! Taught and nursed by a firm that is eminently respectable! Give it me! I am ashamed of you!"

The letter had neither date nor address, but it was written on the thickest, glossiest note-paper, which

only a woman uses, and the handwriting was small and neat like that of a public school girl. Here are the contents :

Brave Boy,

Though it was a bit risky, wasn't it? But then, faint heart never won a fair lady! When you leave the torture chamber, you can meet me at Fullerton's in Regent Street—but immediately sit down and write me the enclosed letter :

Wokingham, Berks,
September, 1924.

Darling Dot,

I have to see a dressmaker in Hanover Square on Monday morning, and it would be ripping if you could meet me at Fullerton's for lunch. Then we could go on to a Matinée together—*The Pantaloons* I am told is the best thing on. And you can see me off from Paddington afterwards. Do come! It is a millennium since we met, and I am bursting with secrets. Till we meet,

Yours to eternity,

BETTY BIRD.

Mother knows about Betty Bird. She succeeded me as head girl. But mother does not know her fist. What a nice head girl you would have made!!! Well, Ta-ta.

DOT.

"Billy, this note was written by an exceedingly naughty little girl. My sense of propriety, highly developed in Brixton, is shocked; but I think Miss Dot will be able to prove Mr. Steel's alibi if ever he is accused of the de Morville murder, and I should like to see her in court, and also her mama, who knows all about Betty Bird."

"Can you trace her?"

"Easily! Little Betty Bird has quite a top twig in Wokingham or her modiste would not be in

Hanover Square. Little Betty Bird won't fly away! Here comes the young man, so you can go and talk to the landlady—she's motherly—not to the chambermaid, she has her work to do. You may watch for Mr. Steel's departure in half an hour. Ask him the way to the Mill. It is not far beyond The Elms, and an interesting old-world place. You can walk with him, talk to him and sum him up. This afternoon I have more important work for you to do, including a visit to Coldmorton Church which must not take up more than five minutes. That allows of two snapshots! Go!"

I stepped to the door, unlocked it. Billy disappeared—I was writing at the table when the door opened and Mr. Charles Steel was announced.

CHAPTER VII

11.30 A.M.—12.15 P.M.

BILLY took himself off with his impudent smile, which is so well controlled. Most people say on meeting him—"What a very unassuming young man!" as he marches almost unnoticed to the best seat. "So attentive and polite", says the elderly matron to whom Billy has listened so demurely; but what would she think if she heard him mimic her afterwards? It's a nice bright boy—quite straight and I at least know that he has a good heart; but he was born without any bump of reverence. I don't believe he even reverences my rank.

The boy who came in looked very sombre, but that was chiefly because the shadow of a great tragedy was upon him. He was three years younger than Billy, and at least a dozen years behind him in knowledge of life. He was nervous and self-conscious. He was terribly aware that he was very young, and had come resolute to play the man and act his part as the male representative of The Elms family. He may have been an untidy little boy for lack of cook's slapping, he might still be untidy in a box-room as Elsie affirmed, but the grub was turning into a butterfly; his trousers were carefully creased, his hair was carefully parted and his black tie was knotted with exactitude. It was my business to make him talk like the boy he was. I had no wish to have the stilted language which he thought befitting a man. So I began as follows:

"I suppose you were not surprised to receive my note. You, after all, represent your father and the family; there is, I understand, no one else. As the

detective in charge of the case, it is of the utmost importance that I should be in touch, and, of course, I do not want to trouble your aunt more than is absolutely necessary."

"I will try to give you all the information in my power."

"Thank you. You know it is very silly, but I have not been thinking of you as a man. I have heard so much about you from your aunt, Miss Courtland, from cook, and others, and quite naturally they regard you as if you were still a boy."

"I am afraid I am not very old."

"And I am afraid of getting old—but then, it does not seem so very long ago when I was a boy on a farm—I sometimes still dream that I am a wagoner's boy. Young men like you never look back. You have so much to look forward to. Well, every now and then you get a shock—a sudden death like that of your aunt brings back old days very vividly. I believe The Elms has been your home since you were six or seven. You must feel your loss as something irreparable."

"That's not all," he said drearily, looking at his boots.

"Well, don't let us talk about it, if you would rather not, I have no right to intrude on your confidence. I am just the detective to you—a vulgar detective at that—but there, I've seen a deal of life, and my only boy died in the War. He wasn't older than you."

The young man looked up—looked at me, and said:

"Do you mind my talking to you? It's like this, my people are away in India, and I have no one else. You see, it's like this, I was almost everything to Aunt Martha, but I feel that I've never cared for her as I should. I've been a selfish young brute all the time. I do wish I had cared for her more."

"She was always kind to you?"

"Yes. But I don't suppose you will understand. It was like this, I came home from India a spoilt,

petted brat, and I found it rather hard going at first. You see, I had always had everything done for me.—I was just 'IT' in the bungalow out there. Well, that wasn't Aunt Martha's idea at all. Of course, she was right, but I didn't see it then. She made me do everything for myself, to go to bed and get up by myself, and then there was trouble if I was not properly washed, and more trouble if I was late. I wasn't allowed to talk at meals. I was just kept in my place. Aunt Martha heard my catechism, and made me learn collects. She sometimes read to me, but she rarely talked to me in those days. I don't think I even liked her then."

"She had never had any children of her own?"

"No, but she knew a lot about them. I can see now that she was jolly sensible in many ways. She really let me have a good time. She always let me run about by myself. She did not mind my going out in all weathers so long as I wiped my boots and changed my clothes when I came in. She never groused when I tore my clothes, if they weren't Sunday clothes. It was Harriet that groused. She let me have friends to tea—jolly good teas cook made—and she let us do what we liked in the garden or the play-room so long as we kept the baize door shut."

"But you were just a little afraid of her?"

"Well, you know, I never did a single thing that was wrong but that she found it out, and I never knew her let me off a punishment. She generally sent me to bed. It was beastly on hot summer afternoons."

"I think I know something she didn't find out. Cook told me of a little boy who used to come downstairs for sweets when he was supposed to be in bed."

"Well, I am not so sure about that. Harriet must have told her. How I hated Harriet in those days! You see, Aunt Martha had her head screwed on all right. She couldn't have punished me without blaming cook, and then wouldn't there have been hell

in the kitchen! No, you bet Aunt Martha knew it, but she had a blind eye!"

"No doubt. Even a detective finds it necessary. But what's the trouble?"

"I was a little beast in those days, and I've been a selfish brute since I grew up. I've never cared for her as I should, and I've never let her see that I was grateful. I wasn't, till she died."

"She knew all that you had done wrong, and yet——"

"That's just it!"

"And everyone tells me she was devoted to you."

"That makes it worse."

"Does it occur to you that your aunt, a sensible woman, knew that there was something about you that was good?"

I thought the young man would break down and sob. I leapt to my feet, crossed the room quickly, threw open the door, and there was the chambermaid. I said:

"Look here, my lass, if I catch you eavesdropping again, I will box your ears so hard that you won't hear anything for a week." She fled before me. She didn't look kissable just then.

The boy had had time to pull himself together. He looked at me with amazement.

"How did you know she was there?"

"An intuition," I replied. "It's my business to know things. You would be surprised if you knew how much I know about you. Let's see. Last Monday, you went up to Town to see Mr. Strong, a dentist, at eleven and four. I think you only kept the former appointment. You were seen with a very attractive young lady lunching at Fullerton's, and afterwards at a farce called *The Pantaloons*. You had a smash on your way back to Sandhurst. You reported the smash and your aunt's death at ten o'clock. Is that all right?"

"All but *The Pantaloons*. We went to see *Cross*

Purposes instead. But, good Lord, how do you know all that?"

"The Information Bureau at Scotland Yard is very well served. I am annoyed, however, that someone took *The Pantaloons* for granted."

"I say, you won't tell him, will you?"

"Him! Him! I see—the young lady's father! No. I am here to find out who murdered Mrs. de Morville, and not to reveal a young man's love-affairs unless they are relevant to the case. I have not yet received a report on what you were doing yesterday, and do you mind telling me, because it may be important. You wonder why? It's not idle curiosity. I am trying to find a murderer with a motive. The murderer may have some connection with you as well as with Mrs. de Morville, and perhaps it is not only Scotland Yard that is interested in your movements. Now, I cannot understand why you did not catch the ten o'clock express at Waterloo. Miss Courtland was expecting you, and she was very worried."

"I had not the right rig for Aunt Martha's funeral. I could not go to the funeral dressed like this, could I? It would not be decent. I had tried on a morning coat at my tailor's last week, and so I went round there to see if they had it ready, or could send it here at once. Then I bought a silk hat—I hadn't one—a couple of ties and things. That's how I lost the train."

"There was a slow train at eleven."

"Nobody ever goes by that to Aldersford. There are only the ten and the three. Besides, I wanted to see Mr. Treherne in Lincoln's Inn, and see how much he knew that wasn't in the papers."

"Did he tell you the terms of Mrs. de Morville's will?"

"No. I didn't ask. I never thought of that. He will be here for the inquest."

"Why didn't you wire?"

The boy blushed. "You see, I paid cash for the topper and things. I promised Aunt Martha I

would; and I am not very flush. It's near the end of the quarter. To tell you the truth I had only just enough to get down here."

"And your aunt paid your debts ten days ago?"

"What! You know that also?"

"Yes. Your hosier's bill I thought excessive."

"That's just what Aunt Martha said."

"So you're penniless until September 29th?"

"Oh, well, I can borrow a couple of quid off cook."

"Surely, Miss Courtland——"

"I prefer cook. She's the only moneylender I have ever known. Ever since I was a kid of ten she has obliged me from time to time, and she'll tell you I always stump up on the day."

"But Miss Courtland?"

"Oh, Aunt Clare? Cook won't tell her. That's all right. Aunt Clare won't bother!"

"She won't be to you what Mrs. de Morville was?"

"Good gracious, no! She's very nice and awfully good and all that, you know, but Aunt Martha was my guardian. Aunt Clare used to kiss and pet me at one time, and give me sweets; but when I grew too big for that sort of thing she let me alone. She hadn't much use for a boy, I think. She's always been kind, you know. Don't think I am crabbing her."

"Has she told you if she suspects anyone of the murder?"

"Yes. She has some perfectly rotten idea that Aunt Martha was shot by some mad johnny who doesn't know what he has done. I told her that the odds would be about one hundred to one against that; and I am afraid I put my foot into it."

"Do you suspect anyone yourself?"

"Well, I don't know. Have you sized up that chauffeur chap?"

"Yes. Have you?"

"Well, he always seemed to me a surly sort of devil. I own he knows all about cars. I'll give him

full marks for that. But Aunt Martha said he was no good at a garden, and would have to go. Aunt Martha, you know, lived more in the garden than in the motor. Well, perhaps I ought to tell you—but I don't see it has any connection—the day before end of leave I went out into the kitchen-garden and met Aunt Martha coming down the path, really flustered. You did not often see aunt put out. Stevens was standing some way off looking after her. I said, 'Been giving that fellow the sack?' She said, 'No.' I said, 'Has he been rude to you?' And she said, 'People are not often rude to me, Charlie, not even my nephews.' I said, 'Come, Aunt Martha, you've only one.' And she said, 'He's given me such a lot of trouble, I think of him as six.' She was quick in the uptake like that.

"Well, she went straight to the workroom and shut the door. Half an hour afterwards I went past the window and looked in. She was saying her prayers, and it was three o'clock in the afternoon, you know. Wasn't it curious?"

"Yes, it was. It's also very interesting to me. And now I am going to tell you something else, and I want you to find out about it. Your aunt cashed a cheque on Monday morning for £100, and took the money in Treasury Notes. She put them into her handbag. Perhaps she wanted to give an anonymous subscription to some charity, but I can't see how she had an opportunity of sending it away before she was shot. Will you find out if those notes are still in her handbag? Thank you. And, by the way, if there is a letter in her handbag, I especially want to see it. You won't forget, will you?"

Charlie rose to go, and just as he reached the door I asked: "Forgive me, one minute. Do you mind telling me if you have any uncles?"

"Two," he replied. "Both of them Steels."

"No uncle a Courtland?"

"No. I had an Uncle George, but he died ever so long ago. I don't know anything about him. Once, when my father was home at the Staff College, I

asked him, but all he said was that he was 'a bad hat'. Aunt Martha only said, 'He died young; he was very clever, and had a wonderful career as a boy at Cheltenham'. I don't know any more."

Again I said: "Thank you."

CHAPTER VIII

12.15 P.M.—1.30 P.M.

ON coming down to the hotel porch I found Harry Holloway there, smoking a pipe.

"Hullo!" he said. "I was just wondering who that young man is."

"Mrs. de Morville's nephew, Mr. Steel. He has just been to see me."

"No, I know about him. The landlady put me wise. I snapped him in case my paper wishes to illustrate my account of the inquest. It's the other young chap I want to know about."

He stood out in the road and pointed. Charlie Steel and Billy Smith were just disappearing.

"I expect he is the young man in No. 15, my next-door neighbour. I have complained about him already to the landlady, for the row he makes at night."

"You are not observing him through the keyhole, I suppose?"

"No. By the way, you didn't employ that nasty little slut to listen at my door?"

"No. She was listening, was she?"

"Yes, but not while we were talking about the murder."

"Bad luck," said Harry.

"For you," said I.

"But it is the young man who intrigues me. He first asked Mr. Steel for a match, and then the way somewhere, and then I thought it might mean something."

"It may. I will look after him. Thanks so much for the hint. A man who stamps like he does at the

witching hour of night must be capable of anything. Have you taken my hint about the gardener-chauffeur?"

"Nothing doing there. The man, you see, reads too much the less intelligent newspapers. If only he read the *Daily Intelligence*, he would be prepared to believe that an earthquake in South America was due to the sinister intrigues of a Soviet government. As it is, he is prepared to believe that any simple journalist asking for information is an *agent provocateur* of a tyrannical bourgeoisie trying to entrap the pure and simple-minded Communist. He has views, that young man, on the secret police."

"How provoking for you! I am sorry you wasted your time."

"I never waste time. I have already sketched out an article on the progress of communism in rural districts, and another on the perils of employing servants."

"Shall we go across the way and see if the Super has any fresh information?"

The Super hadn't. He had just concluded all arrangements with the Coroner for the inquest, and he allowed Harry to place his card at the best angle of the Press table. I had a few arrangements to make with the Super about his evidence, and then I rejoined Harry.

"You did me a good turn over the Lincoln mystery, so I am going to give you a tip. After the inquest, go home." Harry looked a little piqued, and I continued: "This is not a hunt with a clear scent, with hark and away all the time, and journalists following, well up with the hounds. This is more like a parlour puzzle, a jigsaw. I have a certain number of pieces which seem to fit together; some other pieces which I am sure ought to fit in somewhere—and when all are fitted together I don't know what I shall see. A good many pieces are at present missing. I don't mind telling you, but not for publication, that I am engaged with a small group. I am getting them one by one into the picture, and

discovering their connections. A new piece of evidence may at any moment take me further afield. If the solution lies here I shall have finished by Saturday, but until the picture is finished nothing sensational is likely to occur. The trial I think may be interesting, and the proofs a little complicated. That will give the defending counsel a chance."

"You are confident about the result?"

"Unless evidence crops up that takes me out of Aldersford. I don't think it will. I am not hoaxing you. I may be wrong. The end may be sensational, the inquiry won't be—that is my feeling."

"How much of this may I make use of?"

"Let me see. In to-morrow's *Daily Intelligence* there will be a report of the inquest. You may print anything you like about that. Then you may print: 'Interview with Inspector Frost'. Say, 'he was very reserved, but he gave me to understand that he was fitting facts together, and hoped before long to be able to reconstruct the crime and discover the motive. He is of opinion that the criminal will be discovered in the neighbourhood, and that the discovery will cause great surprise'.

"A par like that will help. I am watching who has got the wind up. It may even convey to the murderer that I know more than I do. Now let us go to lunch."

At lunch the red-headed Scot was loud on the rudeness of Bank managers, and much concerned about hairpins. I showed him the packet I had bought, and told him once more about my daughter.

CHAPTER IX

1.30 P.M.—2 P.M.

"I've met an old friend—one of my oldest—George Stevens," said Billy.

"The devil you have!" said I. "But don't introduce your bosom cronies in that devastating fashion. Please remember that I am fifty, and my nerve is not what it was."

"All right, then. According to instructions I had a pleasant chat with the landlady, who is motherly, and happened to be filling a pipe when Mr. Charles Steel descended the stairs. I asked him for a match, and found him most obliging. I asked him the way to the Old Mill, and he said it was straight on. It happened that he was going in my direction, and it was difficult for one so very young to avoid my society, though I am bound to say he was not very encouraging."

"No. Mr. Holloway told me that you forced yourself on him."

"Why did he tell you that? Has he twigged who I am?"

"No. I think he was giving me a friendly hint that you wanted looking after."

"He little knows, sir, the vigilance of your paternal eye. But to proceed. We did not make much headway until we touched on football, and then we became quite friendly, and he is really most intelligent. What he said about Blackheath——"

"I don't want to know. You seem to forget that you are interested in Early English church architecture."

"No, I didn't. I told him I was going to

Coldmorton this afternoon. He asked what for. I said I was going to see the church, and that I was keen about architecture. And he said, 'Good Lord!' Then he apologized very nicely, and said, 'You know, you don't look like being interested in that sort of thing.'"

"Billy, you are an absolute failure! What about George Stevens?"

"Wait a bit. According to instructions I walked on to Old Mill, and took a photograph of it and an older miller. Then I walked back, and who should I meet by The Elms gate but Mr. Brown and Mr. Stevens in conversation. Mr. Brown was good enough to remember having met me at the 'Rose and Crown', and I, feeling sociable, just stopped for a word or two, and asked if there had been any startling discoveries during the morning. Mr. Brown replied that Stevens had been telling him a really funny story of how you had come and peeped at him through the hedge, after saying you were going to the Manor. You did not tell me that, sir, but this morning that story quite brightened me up."

"Billy, you young devil, get on to George Stevens."

"You did say you wanted everything in order. Where was I? Mr. Brown said you were a perfect ass, but Stevens wouldn't allow more than that he was a match for you. After all, he argued, you must be smart enough to catch ordinary people. Besides, you came from London, where people were not all fools. Brown said he came from London himself. 'I thought,' said Stevens, 'you came from Dolminster. Anyhow, twice when I've driven the old gal to that benighted place I've seen you in the streets with the same very smart lady.' 'That's my sister,' said Brown. 'She's married there.' 'Her husband's a man who knows what's what,' said Stevens."

"Brown didn't much like it. He was rather short and superior with Stevens, and that made Stevens turn to me. He said suddenly, 'You're not William

Smith?' I said, 'I am,' and it burst on me all of a sudden that he was the Stevens who used to go with me to the same Council School in Clapham—the Wellington Road one. Brown got quite interested in this happy reunion of long-parted school-fellows. 'You've become a toff,' said Stevens with a nasty sneer. 'I am a lawyer's clerk, and I've got my articles,' said I. 'Soon I shall be a solicitor and a gentleman by Act of Parliament.' 'Oh,' said he, 'and far too grand to know a mechanic—one of the down-trodden proletariat.' 'No one's treading on you at present,' said I. 'What are you doing and going to do?' 'I've been learning my job as a chauffeur,' he said, 'but I am soon going to set up a garage with a friend.'"

"Did he tell you that? He told me he was going to New York."

"It may be the garage is in New York or the moon, but I should not put much money on either. I don't remember that George Stevens was exactly a George Washington."

"Tell me something about him."

"There's not much to tell. He was poor. I believe his mother went out charing. He was sulky, and he was one of those boys who never did anything wrong but he was found out."

"Not like his good little school-fellow, eh?"

"He reminded me of the fact that the teacher always favoured me and had a down on him, because he lived in Paradise Row and I was a tradesman's son. It wasn't that at all. That teacher was a real decent sort. Often I've known him take some kid round to the baker's and stuff him when he thought he had not enough to eat at home. School-teachers aren't bad in their way."

"Anything more to report?"

"No, I think not. Now what are my instructions for this afternoon?"

"You can wait at the window or the porch and watch all the good folk of Aldersford trying to get into the inquest. Two-thirds of them won't. The

jurymen are to view the body at two. They are doing it now. The proceedings will open at the Petty Sessions Court at two-thirty. By that time everyone at The Elms will have to be there. You will get on your bike then, telling the landlady that you are going to Coldmorton. You will stop at The Elms. If anyone is about, you will examine your bike until they have passed. Then you will ask the constable in plain clothes for the key. He is expecting you, and cook will have left the key with him. At least, I advised her to do so. If she hasn't, you won't find it difficult to get in by the pantry window—and you might leave it open—I should not mind giving Harriet something to think about. When you are in the house, go round the bedrooms, and take specimens of the different kinds of hairpins, put them in separate envelopes with particulars. Then go to the box-room at the top of the house and have a good look round. I suspect that room, but I don't know in the least what you may find. I can only give you half an hour in the house.

“Next, go into the kitchen-garden, and at the end you will find some newly-turned soil. It looked to me that George Stevens had done some digging on Monday, and that when he heard I was coming into the garden he was doing a bit more, just to induce me to believe that he meant to dig up the whole bed. The tool-shed is quite close. I expect you can get a spade. Begin the top end. I am just interested in what your friend, who isn't much of a gardener, has been planting at this time of the year.

“The inquest probably won't last more than an hour. I will see it lasts that long, if I have to offer evidence myself. You must be away on your bike to Coldmorton by three-thirty, leaving the key with the constable.

“At Coldmorton you will stay long enough to make three snap-shots, to be developed by the local chemist here; and then you will return, going two miles out of your way to visit the interesting little village church of Badenharn. Three more snaps, if

you please. Being tired with your long afternoon, you will turn into 'The Cross' for tea or a drink. Tea is more advisable. You can sit over it longer without exciting suspicion. Remember Harriet comes from 'The Cross'. They will all be agog there, I expect, about the murder. It is quite possible you might pick up something. Is that quite clear?"

"Quite. Right-o! You shall have a real budget to-night."

CHAPTER X

2.30 P.M.—4 P.M.

THE excitement in Aldersford was intense. The court was small. Many wanted to be present at the inquest, but only a few were able to get in. Before the proceedings began Inspector Frost was the centre of interest. Everyone in Aldersford by this time knew about him, and those who prided themselves on their superior intelligence were naturally most dubious about his competence.

Two subjects were in dispute: Who killed Mrs. de Morville, and was Inspector Frost the man to discover the murderer? As the murderer was unknown and I was apparent, I monopolized attention, and enjoyed it.

The Coroner was a sensible man, and not unnecessarily prolix. His practice was established, and he needed no advertisement; he was a gentleman, and not anxious about the lime-light. He gave me the idea of a man who had promised his wife that he would be home to tea, and did not mean to disappoint her.

The doctor was also brief. With as many technical words as possible he defined the cause of death; was quite clear that the shot had been fired from some little distance, but refused to say whether twenty or thirty yards was the more probable range. The bullet which he had extracted was duly passed round, and each jurymen assumed an air of penetration as he received it, and an air of profound intelligence as he passed it on.

Miss Courtland's evidence was brief, and given with the utmost composure. She looked worn and

ill, and the Coroner was most considerate in the way he elicited her story. No one else asked her any questions. Everyone was so sorry for Miss Courtland.

Then cook entered the witness-box, looking very hot and defiant. She nearly tripped over the step, and then glared at the Coroner as if he had intentionally placed this stumbling-block in her way. In answer to most questions she said that she had told the police that already. She felt it an outrage that she should be there at all, and she let everyone know her grievance.

A juryman asked her if she knew any reason for the crime, and she answered:

"There was no reason."

"How do you know that?"

"If you had lived with the mistress as long as I have, you would know there couldn't be."

Cook by this time had adopted the rolling-pin attitude, and the juryman was more than satisfied.

Elsie, the next witness, was evidently scared almost out of her life. She answered questions in a whisper and had to be told to speak up. This only rendered her quite incoherent, and she said: "Yes, I mean no" in the extremity of her fright. Finally, the coroner, after peering at his memoranda, said: "I think you were under notice?" And then Elsie burst into floods of tears.

The Coroner, who did not live in Aldersford, saw no need to pursue the inquiry, and the jury wanted no information on the subject. Everyone knew about Saturday, what had occurred, and much more. So Elsie was permitted to withdraw to a seat beside cook, who kept patting her on the arm and whispering: "Don't you cry, my dear, and don't you mind him. He's a thoroughly nasty old man!"

Then came Harriet's turn to give evidence, and nothing could be more precise than her manner. It was a manner acquired and perfected by much answering of the door. Then a young juryman

wanted to know why the body had been removed before the arrival of the police.

"I did not think of the police at first, I only thought of my mistress."

"Don't you know that in such cases it is most important that the police should be called in before anything is touched?"

"No, I don't. I don't read the 'Police News', and in respectable houses you don't have a murder every day."

Here Mr. Denton, who was the foreman, having looked at Lawyer Davies at the back of the court and received a nod from him, leant forward and asked:

"As you waited on Mrs. de Morville, you are doubtless aware of the letters she received——"

"Do you mean to insinuate that I read my mistress's letters?"

"No, I did not mean exactly that."

"Then what did you mean?"

Mr. Denton did not quite know how to explain, and did not want to give offence. He became very confused in supposing that Harriet might have noted strange envelopes, might have seen Mrs. de Morville start on taking up some particular letter, even that Harriet by sheer inadvertence might have seen something on a post card that was strange.

Harriet listened to him attentively, and said: "No." Mrs. de Morville, being a lady, had a large correspondence, and it was no business of hers. When Mrs. de Morville went away she forwarded the letters, but she knew enough not to forward tradesmen's circulars. She knew *they* were not important. On this Mr. Denton subsided.

George Stevens next entered the witness-box, and a juryman asked him if he were a Communist, but the Coroner disallowed the question; and then George Stevens protested against such a question being asked him, and against the Coroner for not allowing him to answer it. Justice could not be expected in a bourgeois court. The Coroner, however, rounded

on him sharply, and George Stevens retired to his seat, looking and no doubt feeling rather a fool.

Sir Walter Gerrans next deposed to having received a short note from Mrs. de Morville just before her death. He handed it to the Coroner, and it was read in court. Sir Walter confessed he had no idea what Mrs. de Morville had discovered, and, as it was likely to cause him trouble, he had no particular desire to know what it was. He had no reason to suppose it had any connection with Mrs. de Morville's death, and would not have come to the inquest if the detective from Scotland Yard had not shown interest in the letter.

Lastly, Superintendent Thomas reached the witness-box, note-book in hand. In brief and businesslike terms he stated how he had been called up on the telephone at four-forty-two, had at once proceeded to The Elms, what he had seen, what he had done, and how he had found the footprints in the shrubbery. At this point the audience became very attentive; but, in reply to an inquiry, he announced that the police did not think in the interests of justice that the time had come for stating what steps they had taken to follow up the clue. The public might be assured that the investigations were proceeding with all possible dispatch.

So the Coroner summed up and expressed the sympathy of the court with Miss Courtland and her relations. The jury found that Mrs. de Morville had been murdered by someone at present unknown, and the proceedings terminated in the general disappointment of a sensation-loving audience.

As the court broke up, a dapper-looking old gentleman who had been sitting next to Miss Courtland came up to me and introduced himself as Mr. Treherne. He told me that he was not only the solicitor and trustee for the Courtland estate, but a very old friend of the family, that, of course, I would understand that he had very little experience of criminal matters, but that it might be advisable that

I should come to him rather than to Miss Courtland for any information that I might require, that I would understand how painful the matter was for Miss Courtland, that at such a time everyone must do everything in their power to save her trouble, and that he would be staying at The Elms until after the funeral.

Naturally, I thanked him, and suggested that I should call at The Elms about nine o'clock, when, no doubt, he would have finished dinner. I added that already I had had an interview with Mr. Charles Steel, whom I supposed we must regard as head of the family—only he was very young.

The old gentleman reciprocated my smile, and said: "Mr. Steel seems to have been tremendously impressed by his interview with you, but why I did not discover. Young men are often quite unable to make clear statements."

"He struck me," I said, "as a very pleasant and quite intelligent young man, and he was genuinely sorry about his aunt's death."

"Very right and proper, too," said the old gentleman. "I must now follow Miss Courtland, and shall expect you punctually at nine o'clock."

CHAPTER XI

4 P.M.—4.15 P.M.

As I came out of the court I found Sir Walter Gerrans waiting for me in the passage.

"Forgive me, Inspector, but can I have a few words with you?"

"Certainly. Will you come to the 'Rose and Crown' where I have a sitting-room?"

"I dare say the Superintendent will allow us the use of his room for five minutes."

I inquired; the Super was willing; we went within and Sir Walter closed the door before he began:

"My son has told me what happened this morning, and I thought it best that you should have a full explanation. I am naturally anxious that my son should not be mixed up in this tragedy with which he has nothing to do. The facts are as follows: You will have noticed that just beyond The Elms there is a field with a gate and a notice 'Trespassers will be prosecuted'. That field does not belong to me, and Mr. Grimes, who owns his own farm, is naturally jealous of his rights. Last Saturday, my boy not only went through that field on his way to bathe in the river, but he took his rifle with him and shot at some three rabbits as he went down by the holly hedge. Mr. Grimes heard of it."

"Yes. I expect Stevens told him. Stevens told me that he and your son had had words on the subject."

"My son did not tell me that," said Sir Walter dryly. "But to proceed. In the evening Mr. Grimes came up to the Manor to complain. Of course, I had to apologize, and, of course, I strictly forbade

my son to go through that field any more on any account. On Monday he disobeyed me, and that was the reason why he was surprised into a lie when you suddenly put that question to him in my presence.

"My boy is not a liar, and he lies badly. You must have noticed that as well as I did, though you made no remark. Well, directly you had left, we went into the matter, and you have, I understand, seen the results. I hope you will accept this explanation as satisfactory, and will not find it necessary any longer to connect my son with the murder."

"The explanation is quite satisfactory, and I can assure you that I do not wish to involve Master Dick unless it be necessary. Though I teased him this morning, I think he is a very gallant little boy, and I can bear witness he is loyal to his father. Would you let me write him a note?"

I tore a sheet from my pocket-book and wrote :

Dear Master Dick,

I hope I shall not have to get you into any more trouble, and, if I do, I will try not to behave like a cad. You were quite justified in what you said this morning, and I hope you will forgive me, for I am sorry.

Yours sincerely,
A. FROST.

I folded it and handed it to Sir Walter, who put it in his pocket.

"There is nothing private in it," I said.

"Then perhaps my son will show it me. Meantime, is there anything else you want to know?"

"Not at present, sir, but I should like permission to visit your grounds."

Sir Walter slowly raised his eyebrows, but answered: "Certainly."

"I should like your servants to know," I continued. "I like to conduct my inquiries and

explorations openly, and you will understand that a man of my build is not easily hid. I mean to find the murderer of Mrs. de Morville, and I am not at present quite sure about where I may not have to go in order to complete the accumulating evidence."

"All right," said Sir Walter. "It is news to me that the evidence is accumulating."

With a curt nod he went out.

CHAPTER XII

THE Super looked in directly after Sir Walter had gone out with the welcome news that Mrs. Thomas had brewed some tea, and thought I might like a cup. If so, would I step upstairs: I stepped.

There was not only tea, but also cake. There was not only tea and cake, but two little girls, sweeter than either, and I was soon quite at home. After the dull inquest and the examination of witnesses with nothing of value to tell, it was much more interesting to be introduced to dolls, who, if they could not talk, at least wore wonderful clothes. One of them was completely undressed for my edification, clothed in her nightie, and put to bed. Apologies were made that she was not washed, but her complexion was artificial and would come off in the bath.

In a long cardboard box, standing end-ways in a corner, I was shown a doll in prison, charged with the murder of Mrs. de Morville. She had evidently suffered rough treatment before her arrest, and was in a very battered condition.

Then there was the doll which Mrs. de Morville had given them last Christmas—still as good as new—for she lived in some seclusion at the top of a cupboard, and only came out on Sundays. I was thoroughly enjoying myself. I had finished some old-world romances about the dolls of my daughters who are now grown up, and had confided to Mrs. Thomas that I had reason to believe that my eldest had started for her honeymoon with the "Teddy" she had cuddled as a child, when the Super appeared in a somewhat flushed condition.

"Colonel Sandon is here with the newspaper, and he is swearing dreadfully."

"Then he had better not come upstairs," said I. "A barrack-yard vocabulary should not be heard by young ladies. You never know what complex might result."

"No. You must go downstairs. I told him that you were responsible for the insertion of that notice, and he damned your infernal impudence."

"Hush! Evidently a very naughty man! We will give him five minutes to collect himself and recollect the majesty of the law."

What is more, I kept him waiting just that time. He had exploded in the face of Superintendent Thomas, and five minutes was just the right interval to prevent his carrying on, and not sufficiently long for him to get up fresh steam.

"I hurried into his presence with apologies for keeping him waiting, and said how particularly good of him it was to come. I had so hoped something might result from that notice in the Press.

"What I want to know is, what the devil does it mean? Have you the damned impudence to charge me with the murder of the widow woman? It is true I never could abide her."

"I am afraid, Colonel Sandon, you are altogether under a misapprehension."

"Misapprehension, indeed! You just look at this: 'He is of medium height'—I am just five feet ten in my socks—'has blue eyes, a closely-clipped moustache, and a military appearance. He is dressed in a cloth cap, a loose tweed coat, plus fours, and brogues.' Now, sir, look at me—doesn't that describe me? Everyone at the club recognized it must be me at once. And do you think I am going to stand being called the first murderer by every blasted little caddie on the links? It's libellous—that's what it is. I have already written to *The Times* a most complete denial of being in any way concerned with the old woman's death, and I shall take care that the authorities know about this. The man who sent that

paragraph in the papers will be sacked, dismissed the Force—that is, if the Police Force has any of the decent traditions belonging to His Majesty's other services.”

“Now, Colonel, that you have come, do you mind telling me whether you were walking from Coldmorton to Aldersford on Monday afternoon?”

“Of course I was; the damned fellow who put that notice in knew that all right.”

“I am the damned fellow. I did not know who you were, and I was very anxious to meet you. I am so glad you have been kind enough to come.”

“Glad, are you? And I hope you will be glad when I have done with you.”

“I am anxious to know where you were on the Coldmorton Road at half-past four on Monday.”

“Well, I was best part of a mile away from The Elms, and, what's more, I can prove it. There won't be any uncertainty about my alibi.”

“Nobody wants you to prove an alibi. All I want is your assistance in tracing the murderer.”

“Then why the devil didn't you come and ask me straight out?”

“I did not know who you were or where you lived. You see, it would have been difficult.”

“That's no excuse.”

“Well, Colonel, what would you have done?”

This puzzled the worthy man, and all he could say was: “It's not my business. I'm not a bloody policeman, thank God.”

“Nor a bloody murderer, either, Colonel. I should have thought that you, a soldier and a magistrate, would have been only too willing to help the police in the maintenance of law and order.”

“Who says I am not willing?” asked the Colonel.

“Well, Colonel, I thought when I heard you were here, that you had hastened over to give the very important information I expected from you.”

“I tell you I don't know a damned thing about the matter.”

"You know, however, exactly where you were at four-thirty on Monday afternoon. You said just now that you could prove it."

"So I can. I had just passed the Old Mill when I met Sir Walter on the road. I suppose you'll accept his testimony? I know the time, because Sir Walter was going to the mill, but he looked at his watch and said, 'By Jove! it's just half-past four, and I ought to be at home for that boy's tea.' I should say that's pretty conclusive."

"Yes," I said, "and very interesting to me."

"The devil it is! Now why?"

"I will explain in a minute. Did you walk with Sir Walter towards Aldersford?"

"Yes. I went with him up to the Manor, and went in for——"

"Tea——"

"No, a whisky-and-soda. At my time of life too much tea is just poison. My vet. says so."

"Whom did you meet on the road?"

"No one that I knew. Lord Treholm's car passed me just before I met Sir Walter. I don't think we met anyone else. Yes, I think, a woman with some kids, wheeling a perambulator."

"Now that is all I want to know, and it is very important. Mrs. de Morville was murdered after four-twenty and before four-thirty. It is most probable at four-twenty-five. What became of the murderer? I have always been of the opinion that he did not escape up the Coldmorton Road, and you, Colonel, have proved it. I don't mind what you think of me. I am profoundly grateful to you. Your coming over here like this has been exceedingly opportune. It has helped me more than I can say."

"I always try to do my duty, Inspector. That's why I came. I was a bit put out, because those damned fools at the club who can't see an inch beyond their bloody noses insisted that the police were after me! I've never run away from anyone

in my life, leave out the police. Inspector, have a cigar."

I had one, and we parted friends. He left me wondering why Sir Walter's watch was wrong. This seemed one more attempt to create an alibi. And yet—well, we shall see.

CHAPTER XIII

"So that fire-eating Colonel—I am glad he does not sit on this Bench—did not altogether consume you?" said the Super.

"His was a smoky fire, and this is his smoke," said I, taking a long pull at the cigar and puffing out a cloud.

"Sorry that you put in that par?"

"Not at all. It has led to my getting some necessary information."

"You are no nearer to finding the murderer?"

"Oh, yes, I am. I've proved to-day that Mrs. de Morville was not killed by Dicky Gerrans or by Charles Steel."

"Whoever supposed that she was?"

"Two people, if you want to know, wished me to believe that the small boy had let off his rifle in the wrong direction; and, when you've seen him, it doesn't seem unlikely. But I've proved he didn't. I had some suspicions of Master Steel myself until I had seen him. He's all that he should be, and his alibi quite water-tight."

"In time, I suppose, there are a few million other folk whom you will be able to prove didn't do it," said the Super with a laugh.

"That will be unnecessary," I replied. "You see, this is like a jigsaw puzzle, and I've nearly finished the framework of the picture. There are bits about other people that fit together, but I don't quite see where they all come in. As we go on the central figure will suddenly find a place."

"Well, you needn't worry about young Fred

Milward any more. I've made inquiries. He came to the Manor straight from the covert on the Larnham Road. At least three people saw him on the way. I suppose he needn't be watched any more. He's getting angry about it. Caught my man looking at him."

"Did he, now? He's got a temper, you say? Well, tell your man to go on watching him, and when he explodes—his language won't be worse than the Colonel's—you can refer him to me. I want to know about that other man who was in the shrubbery."

"Why don't you go and ask him?"

"What, with a pencil and note-book! 'What is your name? What is your age? Where were you on Monday afternoon? Be very careful what you answer!' Not much! You send him to me in a temper, just to give me a piece of his mind, and I shall learn something all right."

"Are you looking after that Bolshie chauffeur?"

"Rather! But I have a witness who can prove that he did not do it. Unfortunately, the witness also proves that the Bolshie did not give me a true account of his movements."

"I see. Well, I had better leave you to write your report for the Yard. Will you want it taken to Town?"

"No, thanks. All I have to say at present can be quite safely sent through the post."

CHAPTER XIV

6.45 P.M.—7.30 P.M.

AT a quarter to seven I returned to the "Rose and Crown", and met the landlady in the bar. I stopped to say: "I hope you told that young man in No. 15 about the noise."

"Yes, sir, and the poor young gentleman won't make much noise to-night."

"What do you mean?"

"He came in twenty minutes back, looking that ill. He couldn't take anything, but went straight to bed. He wasn't like himself, though he did say that he hoped the old gentleman in No. 16 wouldn't disturb him."

"Dash his impudence!"

"Oh, he's just young, sir, and he likes his joke even when he looks that pale that I was downright sorry for him. He comes from London, you see, and he's been doing too much to-day. Up early this morning, and away on his motor-bike; and then rushing all over the country again this afternoon. I think I will just step up and see if he wants anything."

"I should say it was the pickles I saw him eating at lunch. Well, I will go and see if I can get some dinner."

So Billy was anxious to see me, and could not wait for our evening interview when I should have come back from The Elms.

"He's found something," I said to myself, "and it's probably a mare's nest. Anyhow, I can't stand excitement on an empty stomach. You have to be as young as Billy for that. Besides, the motherly old bird will be buzzing round at present."

CHAPTER XV

7.30 P.M.—8.15 P.M.

"I'VE found it!" exclaimed Billy, almost before I had shut the door.

"What is it?" said I. "There, you need not flourish it about like some Broncho Bill on the films."

Billy, clad in pyjamas, was advancing into the room flourishing an automatic pistol in one hand and carrying a packet of cartridges in the other.

"There's what I found under the mould, and you can go straight off and charge George Stevens with the murder."

"Billy, is that what you have to tell about the little friend of your innocent childhood? Remember the happy days when you played at marbles on the quieter pavements of Clapham."

"Well, his nicker's down this time."

"I am not so sure."

I compared the cartridge with the one for Dick's rifle. I looked at the bullet in my pocket identical with the one at the police station. I was able to say with certainty: "This is not the pistol which caused Mrs. de Morville's death."

Billy's face fell, and, to comfort him, I said: "It's a very important find, and I think we can make use of it. Your school-fellow won't half get the wind-up when he knows what we have. Threatened with that pistol, I shouldn't be surprised if he spoke the truth."

"But I don't understand. What made him bury it?"

"Billy, I'm shocked. To think that he and you sat on the same form and shared the benefits of the

same education, learning tit-bits about everything but common sense. Suppose that you, instead of young George, had been in possession of that attractive little weapon when a murder was committed not fifty yards away from you, what would you have done? You'd have buried it just like George did, but you would probably not have been content to dig up such a little patch as to excite my suspicion."

"But what could a chauffeur want with a pistol like that?"

"Perhaps it was in order to be prepared for the Class War—we will hope not. Perhaps it was because he was going to New York, where, I am told, most men carry a gun. Perhaps it was simply because he is, after all, a boy, and a pistol for most boys is the essence of romance. Now, Billy, I hope you were not so flushed with triumph over your find that you neglected the other little matters I told you to inquire about."

"Rather not! You see, really I went through the house first, and I rather enjoyed myself afterwards. All the world seemed bright with that pistol in my pocket."

"Never forget to report things in order. How often have I told you that? Never delude yourself that at your tender age you can estimate their importance."

Billy drew himself up, and began :

"According to instructions, I got out my motor-bike and casually told the landlady that I was about to visit Coldmorton Church for my better acquaintance with Early English architecture. I thought I had some engine-trouble as I approached The Elms, and dismounted to examine while a couple of pedestrians were in sight. Then I obtained the key from the constable in plain clothes, whose conscience was disturbed, because he had promised the cook that he would keep it, and had the Super's orders to give it to me.

"After entering the house I proceeded upstairs, and in Mrs. de Morville's room I found only one

sort of hairpin—a specimen is enclosed in this envelope. They were all with rather big black prongs. I may here say that seeking for hairpins, I opened the dressing-table drawers, and you may like to know that the deceased lady kept a diary—not a neat little Lett's affair—but a stout volume, handsomely bound. Having no instructions, I did not bring it away."

"Billy, you're the broth of a boy! I had never thought of a diary. If we can get it, our task should be easy."

"I am quite prepared to make a burglarious entry through Harriet's pantry. It would be a lark!"

"Don't be silly! I shall, of course, ask for it, and see that I get it. Go on with the hairpins!"

"The next room I visited was Miss Courtland's—a sumptuous apartment, replete with every luxury. She had hairpins galore, and of all kinds. You will perceive a copper hairpin among my exhibits, but there were not more than a dozen of that kind."

I whistled.

"Next," he went on, "I entered what I imagine was a spare bedroom, and never a hairpin could I find. It was, I gathered, in possession of the law. There was a bag such as I, an articled clerk of Williamson and Evans, of Southampton Row, recognized as an old friend. Inside was more than one bundle of papers tied up in red tape by an inefficient office-boy. Also there was Mrs. de Morville's will, duly executed. I ascertained so much, but had no time to find out the provisions."

"Next, I found a bedroom which I allocated to my friend, Mr. Steel. It had no hairpins, but it had a mass of brown paper on the floor, and a superfine morning coat and vest on the bed. I tried them on—they would have given a tone to the whole of Clapham. The other two bedrooms were evidently not occupied, so I went upstairs, and you will note that cook follows her mistress. Oh, yes! I know it was cook's room. There was a Bible in it which she won as a prize at the Badenhams Sunday School."

There was also a framed and signed photo of Mr. Steel, aged fourteen; and he did not write particularly well in those days. There was another photo of a soldier—a cheap thing taken in France. It was cook's young man!"

"Yes," I said. "He's dead, and he died for you. Don't talk like that."

"Sorry. Next, I went to Harriet's room. Hairpins all of the copper sort. You'll get a line on Harriet, after all. Well, I did not see much else. In Harriet's room every drawer was locked.

"Lastly, the room of your little friend. What do you call her—Elsie? There weren't many hairpins, not above half a dozen. They were of all sorts. Only one of the copper ones. I guess Elsie does not buy hairpins. She borrows what she needs. She's housemaid, isn't she?"

"The hairpin evidence does not seem conclusive," said I.

"But Harriet's the girl for copper ones. If one is found, it is a ten to one chance that it is hers."

"Now go on to the box-room."

"The box-room gave evidence that it had been put straight by someone in a not very remote past. There was no dust, though there were plenty of things to collect it. One up to Elsie, I say. Next, her handiwork had been disturbed, and I could not help thinking that Mr. Steel was not altogether responsible. There were a number of old school books piled just against the wall, and one of the piles had come down with a run. It looked as if Mr. Steel had tried to draw out a book from near the bottom and brought the lot down with a run. There was also a packing-case full of odds and ends. Someone had been searching for something and forgotten to put back the things he had taken out. That would be like Mr. Steel, also.

"But would Mr. Steel pull down a pile of old curtains off a shelf? Why should he? And he certainly did not leave this in the room, for he went to Sandhurst on the Friday."

Billy put into my hand the first sheet of *The Times*, on which a newsagent had scribbled Mrs. de Morville's name. This sheet had only been issued on Monday.

"Was the rest of the paper there?"

"Not a sign of it."

"Well, Billy, you deserve full marks for this."

"And an explanation."

"The explanation may come to me in the watches of the night, but my prophetic soul assures me it is a clue. Now let us go on to Coldmorton and Badenham."

"Besides the church, accurately described in the guide-book, the most interesting thing I saw in Coldmorton was that red-headed journalist trying to find a man in plus fours who also wore brogues. He told me all about it, and I advised him to stick to the close-clipped military moustache. I did not want him to stumble over some colonel's foot."

"On my way back from Coldmorton, I deviated to the village of Badenham in order that I might spend five minutes in the church, according to instructions. From the church I proceeded to 'The Cross'. The church is accurately described in the guide-book, 'The Cross' is not."

"I can read the guide-book for myself; tell me more about 'The Cross' without any more nonsense."

"'The Cross' is in Early English style, and was erected by public subscription to commemorate those who fell in the Great War."

"Damn!"

"Forgive me, sir, but you ought not to speak like that."

"Billy, any more of your impudence, and I'll send you back to London."

"Very sorry, sir, to displease you, but I have to confess that from the—the War Memorial—I dropped into a public-house, tired after so much sightseeing. It was a very pretty little pub by the wayside. It had little bow windows, with square panes of glass.

A rose-tree was climbing up the whitewashed walls. The roof was thatched. There was a stone bench in front, also a horse-trough. It was just like a Christmas-card, or the village inn at the theatre. It was the sort of place from which the village heroine in a bewitching cap ought to have danced out and sung a song for a chorus of picturesquely-grouped villagers. And it was here, I thought, Harriet served half-pints in maiden meditation fancy free, and acquired a taste for copper-coloured hairpins."

"I suppose you must tell your tale in your own way?"

"It is the only way to be truthful. As I approached the door with a face of wistful inquiry, Harriet's brother rolled out to meet me in his shirt-sleeves. A jovial fat man, not a bit like Harriet, I should think—an easy-going, good-natured sort of man—a man who has a sweet temper, but may lose it, a man who, if he loses it, goes straight off the deep end.

"'Can I have some tea?' I asked, standing up the bike.

"'Yes, if you like,' he replied, and then, turning to the doorway, shouted: 'Wife, here's a young fellow who wants tea.' With that he rolled off round the house to the back. The admirable result of a Band of Hope training had no attraction for him.

"Mrs. Nokes was a buxom woman, not above thirty-five. She looked jolly enough, but she had not much to say to strangers. Said I: 'You have a pretty church.' 'Yes, sir,' said she. 'It's the place where Mrs. de Morville used to live,' said I. 'Yes, sir,' said she. 'Would you like some jam?' I did want jam, but it did not seem to sweeten our conversation, though I congratulated her on it, and said I was sure she had made it herself. She left me to enjoy the good things she had provided and to contemplate the apartment. It was a low, dark room. The window was small, and a row of geraniums in pots obscured such light as might have penetrated. I wondered if the crochet antimacassars which

protected the horsehair chairs had been made by the fair hands of Harriet. The room was just a little stuffy so I opened the door. It was impossible to open the window. It was so that I was able to overhear the following conversation:

"I thought I would just drop in as I was passing."

"It's very kind of you, Mrs. Goodman, I am sure."

"It's terrible bad news this about Mrs. de Morville."

"You're right there."

"Alice says she won't stop on now; but I tell her after all these years with the lady she won't suit herself again."

"Alice ought to get married."

"Well for the matter of that so should Harriet."

"And what's more, that's just what Harriet is going to do."

"Well, I never did! And I've always said she was born to be an old maid."

"Now, Mrs. Goodman, it's a great secret. I oughtn't by rights to have said anything. Harriet didn't tell me and she was mad when she found out I knew. It was that young footman chap at the Manor told me, and it's quite true. Harriet's going to marry the butler. They do say he is a quiet, steady man. He's got a good job, and that old Gunton at the Lodge can't live for ever. A very nice little home it will be for them."

"Lor', Sarah, you and Jim must be pleased!"

"Jim hasn't said much so far. Of course, Harriet won't be able to do as much for the children as she has done. May be, she'll have some of her own; but, we can do without Harriet. The children and I can get along all right. You see, Mrs. Goodman, it's like this. Harriet's very kind and we are grateful, but Harriet never did think me good enough for Jim, I ain't—I know that. She don't think I know how to bring up Jim's children, and there's always trouble when she comes to see us. Things are never quite

as they should be when she comes, and the children never behave when she's here. I don't know why. And then Jim gets mad. He thinks a deal of his sister, and he feels shamed like when she makes remarks. But there, I must not talk like this. There's a gent in the parlour who'll be wanting more hot water."

"I didn't, you know, but I was ready to pay her very moderate bill which I shall debit to the British public. I said good-bye feeling that my visit had not been wholly wasted, and outside I found Mrs. Noke's eldest son, a litue scout, examining my bike. A really nice smart kid."

"Yes, I know, you told him you were a Silver Wolf, and he went down straight away on his face and crawled on his belly to kiss your boots."

"No, sir, every scout is the brother of every other scout, so we gripped our left hands, I explained all about my bike, and he told me about his troop and how he had become a second-class scout. Not bad for a kid of twelve! Then as we became real chums the conversation somehow turned on Harriet.—Oh, I know how it was, I admired the smart knife he was carrying, and he said his aunt had given it him. I said she must be a jolly good aunt, and he said 'Yes' so doubtfully, that he tried to explain. She was a good aunt, and she was always making him and his sisters things and giving them presents, but she was so particular that her visits were not an unmixed joy.

"Only last Saturday she had come to 'The Cross' and there had in consequence been an unholy row. Here's his version of it.

"'Aunt Harriet said, "It's a pity your mother has never taught you manners!" and somehow that put me in a wax, and I said something jolly rude, and Dad, I didn't see him, was just coming in at the door, and he said, "How dare you speak like that, you go straight upstairs to bed, and you'd best be sharp about it!"

"'It was hard luck. You see, it was troop night

and the Commissioner was coming and I had two badges to receive.—Why didn't I say I was sorry? —You don't say anything when Dad speaks like that. —He doesn't often.—And you aren't slow about getting into bed, either. You would be sorry for yourself if you weren't there when he came upstairs, and he mayn't give you more than three minutes.'

"That was his tale. Throws a flood of light on Aunt Harriet, doesn't it? Well, I had to be moving on, and the kid asked me to give him a ride, so I took him up behind me and when we came to the main road, just by the Old Mill, he said, 'They have jolly good ginger-beer there.' I said, 'You can blow yourself out with as much ginger-beer as you want at 'The Cross', can't you?' 'No,' he said. 'Dad will never let us have a bottle. He says business is business, and if he gives things away, it puts his accounts out. I don't think Dad is good at arithmetic. We have to look out on the days he makes up his books.'

"Well, you know after that we had to stop at the Old Mill, and I filled up that kid with four buns and two bottles of ginger-beer which the British exchequer will have to pay for. I say, they have a topping old grandfather-clock at the Old Mill. It used to belong to the Gerrans family, but they gave it away when such things were unfashionable. The present Sir Walter wants to buy it back, but he hasn't a chance—the folk of the Mill are that proud of it. They boast that they only put it right, post office time, once a year, and it is never more than a minute or two wrong. The funny thing is, that it is just a quarter of an hour slow at the present time."

"The devil it is! You didn't tell them so?"

"Not I. It's not my business to put people out of conceit with themselves. I said good-bye to Jim and left him to work off that ginger-beer by a three-mile walk, and came on here. I was so bucked having that pistol in my pocket, that I wanted you to know at once, and could not think of any better

stunt for being in my room at this hour, than shamming ill. In the dim light of the bar the landlady was not hard to deceive. She's a real nice woman and she's been up here with dry biscuits and weak brandy and water since."

"Well, Billy, your bilious attack shall have its reward. You will have three lines of commendation in my report.—Mentioned in despatches—that's it. You can put it in *Who's Who* when you write your biography. I must be going."

"Yes, but look here—can't I recover and get downstairs for a bit?"

"Certainly not. In an hour's time you might ring for some dry toast and a cup of tea."

"But what am I to do?"

"Why, read that book on Early English architecture, to be sure."

As I closed the door, did I hear that profane boy say "Damn"?

CHAPTER XVI

8.15 P.M.—9.0 P.M.

BILLY, notwithstanding his impudence, is a very useful boy. To hear him mimic the two ladies in the bar at "The Cross", or the little scout, would convince anyone that he might make a fortune in the Halls; but he has other qualities. As he grows older and reflects more he may yet end as one of the Big Five.

I had three-quarters of an hour before I had to call on Mr. Treherne at The Elms, and I walked up to the railway station in ten minutes. The London express was expected, and in the refreshment-room I found the red-headed Scot. I did not notice him, until I had ordered two pork pies and two bottles of ginger-beer.

"Going back to town?" I asked.

"Yes! It seems to me that here there's nothing doing."

"Quite right! I gave young Holloway the tip this morning."

"He's gone. I thought he might have had the decency to motor me up to Town."

"Didn't he?—Oh, thanks," I said to the barmaid who handed me two pork pies in a paper bag.

The Scot looked at them attentively, and seemed surprised as I put a ginger-beer bottle into each of my tail-pockets. So, I said, "If you have to sit up all night in an empty cottage waiting for a murderer to come, it is well to have something to eat,"

"Good Lord!" said the Scot. "Is that what you're up to?—I say, can I come with you?"

"I am sorry," said I. "But it's against the rules of the Force to endanger anyone's life," and then showing him Stevens's automatic pistol, I added: "You see, I am prepared. There's your train, good-bye," and we both hurried on to the platform.

"Dear, dear," I said to myself. "Young Henry Holloway will be sick if he publishes an interview with Inspector Frost in *The Vigilant* to-morrow. Well, serve's him right, he ought to have taken the little blighter up to Town in his runabout."

Just then the stationmaster approached and I introduced myself as Inspector Frost. I just wanted to know if he had noticed any suspicious strangers arriving or leaving the station on Monday. He hadn't. I supposed that there was a good deal of local traffic between Coldmorton and Dolminster. He explained that most Aldersford people went to Coldmorton to buy things—the shops were better there. In the old days the gentry used to go to Dolminster on county business, but now they go in their motor-cars. "We still issue cheap tickets on Thursday—that's market day in Dolminster, and it's early closing in Coldmorton. I believe the service pays, but not many go from here. Last Thursday there was only one passenger by the one-ten—that butler from the Manor. He's pretty regular on Thursdays. It's his afternoon off, I suppose."

"Well," I said, "I should like to see Dolminster—interesting old place—fine cathedral, eh? But there, I'm tied here. I have to keep busy, and it's none so easy to find out about that murder."

"Most folk say you won't do it."

"You never know! If you read the papers you'll know Inspector Frost has had some success. Good night."

Ten minutes later I again entered my room at the "Rose and Crown" and passed in to Billy the two pork pies and ginger-beer. "I didn't want you to starve, and I know that scouts screw up their courage with that fizzy stuff. Good-bye. I shall be late at The Elms, if I don't look sharp."

CHAPTER XVII

9 P.M.—10.15 P.M.

HARRIET opened the door to me. I asked for Mr. Treherne, but she showed me at once into the drawing-room, where I found Mr. Treherne, Miss Courtland and Mr. Steel, all correctly attired, for you felt at once that even a murder would not admit of Miss Courtland's departure from the conventions.

"I know that you have come to see Mr. Treherne," said Miss Courtland, "but my nephew has been telling us of a considerable sum of money which you expected to find in my sister's handbag—I have it here. There is only her purse and a few shillings in it."

"Are there any letters?"

"None."

"It's odd," said I. "For Mrs. de Morville certainly cashed cheques for £105 on Monday morning and put them in her handbag. It is difficult to understand how she sent them away before she was killed, but I shall not be satisfied until I know where they are."

"What are you going to do and where are you going to look?" asked Charlie.

"Well, I should not mind betting that I restore them to Mr. Treherne before to-morrow night."

"You think that robbery was the motive for the crime?" asked Miss Courtland.

"No, I don't. The motive is just the one thing that at present I don't know."

"What have you discovered?"

"A good many little things that will take a great

deal of piecing together. I am sorry that just at present I can't tell you any more."

"You don't believe in my homicidal maniac?"

"No, madam, and I shan't until I have exhausted all the other possibilities."

"Why were the police so close about those foot-prints?" asked Charles.

"Probably because they don't know anything."

"Is that the reason why you are so close, Inspector?" asked Miss Courtland.

"No! But I don't want the murderer to lay a false trail."

"But if you told us," said Charles, "no one would know."

"Walls have ears," said I, as Harriet opened the door and brought in coffee.

I don't take coffee after nine o'clock at night. I want to sleep when I go to bed. Mr. Treherne was like minded and suggested that we should have our talk in the work-room. We therefore took leave of Miss Courtland; and Mr. Steel stayed behind to keep her company.

A fire was burning pleasantly in the work-room. There was a deep arm-chair on either side of the hearth. A small table close to the farther table contained glasses, whisky, and a siphon. Mr. Treherne mixed me a drink and another for himself, and then took out his cigar-case and offered me one.

"Miss Courtland told me yesterday how she disliked tobacco."

"Did she?" said the old gentleman. "But then I've known Clare Courtland since she was a baby in arms, and one is not dictated to by people one has known as babies. It's all right for Charlie to be sent to smoke in the kitchen—good discipline, don't you know—but I'm not Charlie and I'm going to smoke and you had better follow my example."

He lit his cigar, and I produced a pipe which I told him quite truthfully that I preferred.

"And now, Mr. Treherne, I wish to know all about Mrs. de Morville's brother."

"Good Lord!" said Mr. Treherne, "how did you hear about him?"

"Where is he?"

"He's dead. Died more than fourteen years ago. I was at his death-bed and attended his funeral."

"That's pretty good evidence," I said. "Tell me about him."

"Is it any good raking up the past? He has been dead such a very long time. He can't have anything to do with this awful mystery."

"The reasons for a murder sometimes are very far back. To-morrow morning you might walk round the garden and have a look at the chauffeur-gardener. If he reminds you of anyone, let me know, but don't go asking him questions or you may defeat the cause of justice. Now perhaps you won't mind telling me all you know about Mr. George Courtland. I think Mr. Steel told me this morning that his name was George."

The old gentleman was visibly impressed, he was also affected. He said "Dear, dear," more than once, and also "Poor Clare Courtland, I do hope there will be no further family scandal. The poor woman, she is very brave; but an old man has eyes. She is suffering terribly from the shock. I don't know what would happen if anything else were to come out. You won't say anything, I suppose, unless it is necessary to procure a conviction. You won't mention to her any suspicion you may have before the funeral?"

"You will have noticed in the drawing-room that I am not troubling Miss Courtland with any of my suspicions, but with you it is different. You are a lawyer, and I don't suppose you could be shocked by any family secret—so many people must have confided in you. I am only asking you this because I don't want to make a mistake in my investigations. If you want to know, I don't myself believe the chauffeur is guilty of the crime. If he isn't, it is very possible that no one will ever know how I came to connect him with George Courtland."

The old man thought for some minutes, looking into the fire, and then told me the history of the Courtlands.

"Colonel Courtland had retired when I first knew him and was living at Cheltenham. He had been in the Dragoon Guards and was a very proud, stiff man, with, if you understand me, a very military backbone. He was very strict in his religious views, very strict in his life, and he was very much too strict with his family. I imagine he was naturally a tyrant, and a military life hadn't helped him to be anything else. His wife, if you will pardon me the vulgarism, couldn't call her soul her own; I don't think she minded very much: she was a large and placid lady who rather enjoyed being squashed. It was different with the children. They all, with the possible exception of Clare, inherited their father's strong will. They were all repressed. Even Mrs. de Morville, splendid woman that she was, could never be entirely spontaneous. She married a man thirty years older than herself and made him an excellent wife; but it was scarcely a love-match—she married to get away from home. Mary was more fortunate. She married young Captain Steel who had just done well and received a D.S.O. in the Boer War. He had some means and the old gentleman was very pleased with the marriage. Clare stayed on at home. She was much younger than the others, perhaps she was more pliant. She was the favourite of the family. Even the old man was not so hard on her as the others. I always wonder she has never married. She has, you must have noticed it, such a yielding nature."

"Yes! I should say she would be good at ju-jitsu."

"I don't follow you, sir. Jew what did you say?"

"No matter. It is Japanese wrestling, where you yield to win."

"Ha! Well, still I don't quite catch your meaning. But you were wanting to know about poor George Courtland. He was a most attractive boy,

and did remarkably well at Cheltenham and passed third or fourth into Woolwich. He wanted to be a Sapper, but his father would not hear of it—his father put him into the R.H.A. with a very insufficient allowance. Well, to make a long story short, the boy got into debt. He had card debts; and a brother officer to whom he owed money, being himself hard up, pressed for payment. George forged his father's name to a cheque, the Bank referred the cheque to drawer, and the old man refused to honour it.

"That was the end of George. It killed his mother. Yes, it killed that terrible old man in time. He still went to church twice on Sunday, though he was always quarrelling with his parson. He still went to the club, where he wasn't exactly popular. Nobody was ever allowed to mention the boy in his presence. He always declared he had no son—but it killed him all the same. He died two years later, blasted by his own pride?"

"And the boy?"

"He disappeared. No one knew what had become of him. It was ten years later that Miss Courtland sent me a letter from him, written from a hospital, saying that he was dying and asking some consideration for his wife and child. I don't know why he wrote to Miss Courtland. He would have done better to write to Mrs. de Morville.—She was the practical one. I suppose he was nearer in age to Clare, and as I've mentioned she was softer than the others. Anyhow the letter was sent on to me, and I visited the hospital to find the fine young fellow I had known a mere wreck. He had come down in the world. He had married a woman of the people. He was there in a ward, dying under an assumed name! Clare sent me the money for his funeral, and I attended it. That's why I can tell you quite certainly that he has been dead these fourteen years and more."

"What was the assumed name?"

"I have forgotten. I dare say I can find out."

"And what did Miss Courtland do for the widow and the child?"

"Now that I can't tell you. Miss Courtland was going abroad. She remained in Rome and Florence for the next three years. I saw nothing of her and heard from her but seldom. I only renewed my acquaintance with her when she came to live with her sister some twelve years ago."

"It's a sad story. Now I have another question to ask. Who benefits under Mrs. de Morville's will?"

"The will is very sensible. I have read it to the interested parties this afternoon. Mrs. de Morville's disposable property must come to rather over £8,000—the result of twenty years' saving. The whole amount, save some legacies to servants, is left in trust for Mr. Charles Steel, but his Aunt Clare has the income for life. Mrs. de Morville was very anxious that if her sister survived her she should be able to live on at The Elms. With the £750 she will now have from the father's estate and another £400 a year this will be quite sufficient. Mr. Charles Steel, I may add, is a young gentleman who from his parents and his aunts is heir to quite a considerable competence."

"He may have to wait some time for his inheritance, and meantime he may want to marry."

"A soldier should not marry until he is a major. Colonels don't like it, so there is plenty of time for the boy. Not that I don't believe myself in early marriages. I married too late. I have always regretted it. I hope my daughter will marry young. I should like to have grandchildren before I die."

"Mr. Steel strikes me as the sort of boy who might be susceptible to the charms of the fair sex, but, of course, it will be ten years at least before he can think of marrying—fifteen years if he follows your advice."

"Yes, that is why I told Mrs. Treherne not to ask him so constantly to our house. We have to be prudent. Not that my daughter takes any interest

in young men. The girls of to-day are so different from those of our time. They go to school. They make pals—I think that is the word they use—with other girls. They have interests of their own. They don't seem to care for young men. Why, that girl of mine only last Monday was out all day with a girl friend who had come up from the country. They lunched together at a restaurant, and went together to a play. What my mother would have thought of it, I tremble to think—but it's all right, you know. Thank God, I can trust my daughter."

"You are a happy man, Mr. Treherne, I say so, and I am a father also. I think I may say like you I can trust my daughter. But to get back to my inquiry. Do you know if Mrs. de Morville kept a diary?"

"No, I don't; and I think I have been through all the papers in this room. I have not come across one."

"Have you looked in the right place? A man, if he is careless, leaves a diary lying about on his writing-table. If he is wise he keeps it in the top draw of the same table. He only keeps a diary because he finds it useful for reference. But a woman doesn't keep a diary for reference. She keeps it for—what shall I say?—soul expression. A reserved lady like Mrs. de Morville, who found it impossible in ordinary life to express her emotions, almost certainly wanted an outlet somewhere, and I should expect that she kept a diary. And where would she keep it? The more private it was, the more likely she would keep it in her bedroom. A woman spends much more time in her bedroom than a man. It means more to her. If I wanted to find Mrs. de Morville's diary, I should look in her dressing-table drawer."

"Well, I will look there directly the funeral is over. It would be indecent to ransack her room while her coffin is in it."

"And remember, please, I especially want to see it when it is found."

"Of course, I will talk the matter over with Miss Courtland and let her know of your wish."

"Now, it is just that I want to avoid. If there is any such a diary I think it may be of a very private nature. If Miss Courtland sees it first I can understand it would be most painful for her to think of its contents being known to an outsider like myself. She would be very reluctant to give it up, and it would be most unpleasant if I had to obtain an order to inspect it. Now as a man of the world you know it does not matter a button if I read the most intimate details. I have no interest in the family, and I am not likely in future to come across them. Miss Courtland might be terribly distressed if she knew I had read her sister's diary. If she does not know, what does it matter?"

"I see. I dare say there is no diary. If there is, I must let you know. I hope, however, things may be arranged so that there will be no trouble. I am very anxious to spare Miss Courtland as much as possible."

At this point I rose to go, but Mr. Treherne stopped me.

"Wait a bit. I have discovered a little mystery on my own account, and I should value your opinion about it."

He went to a cupboard and unlocked the door. He took out first a piece of brown paper, with a label on it addressed to Mrs. de Morville, with a printed head-line showing it came from Manton's, Dolminster, then a little Queen Anne cream-jug, and finally a letter which ran:

Dear Martha,

This is just to wish you many happy returns of the day. I am sending you a little bit of silver. The mark is all right and it was a bargain. I am looking forward to seeing you to-morrow at lunch.

Yours affly.,

SUSAN ACKROYD.

"Well," said I, "it is strange that Mrs. de Morville folded and put away the brown paper and the jug in a cupboard, otherwise I don't see what is mysterious."

"You know nothing of heraldry, I suppose? Mrs. de Morville did. Look at the arms engraved on the jug—Three golden dolphins on a field of azure with a bend d'or—that is what they represent. They are the arms of Sir Walter Gerrans."

"That throws some light on the 'discovery' of Mrs. de Morville in the letter read at the inquest."

"Well, so it seemed to me."

"Do you mind locking it up again very carefully and saying nothing about it to anyone? I happen to know that Harriet is thinking of marrying the butler at the Manor, and it occurs to me that that admirable gentleman's servant may prove to be a thief. I will communicate with the police at Dolminster before speaking to Sir Walter."

"Oh, by the way—Sir Walter is very anxious to have all Mrs. de Morville's memoranda about Blankshire families, including his own. They are all in the drawers. He is a genealogist and the right person to have them. Miss Courtland has no objection."

"Well, even I do not suppose that the secret of the murder will be found far back in the Middle Ages."

"Have you really discovered anything?"

"Yes. I know where the weapon is with which Mrs. de Morville was killed. I know the place from which the shot was fired. It was not from the shrubbery. I have at present no proof that would warrant my arresting anyone, but I shall find it. I am still utterly at sea about the motive of the crime."

The door at that moment opened and Miss Courtland came in. She said:

"Charlie has just gone to bed"—that was right: I had heard him five minutes before, saying good night in the hall—"so I thought I would just look

in and ask you to lock up when the Inspector leaves. I am, I am afraid, just a little nervous."

With a smile to us both she went out again.

"Won't you have another drink before you go?" asked Mr. Treherne.

"No thanks," said I. "But I say, this room is full of smoke. We ought to open the window." Suiting action to the word I threw up one of the sashes.

"But I have been asked to see all safe, and you don't suppose I am going to sit in a draught for the pleasure of airing the room."

"I did not think of that," said I, and shut the window with a bang, and pretended with great care to secure the latch.

CHAPTER XVIII

I WALKED steadily to the end of the drive, and looked about for the plain-clothes constable, who ought to have been about and wasn't there. Things, I thought, will be lively in the Super's office to-morrow morning. Then I retraced my steps and as I reached the back drive, my ear caught the sound of approaching steps. I withdrew at once to the shrubbery, and Mr. Brown from the Manor soon passed by. Has he been serenading Harriet at the pantry window, or has he been searching for that cream-jug among the de Morville plate? Anyhow, Harriet should have been going to bed.

The light went out in the work-room, and I went round the house to see the light switch on in the spare room. There were still lights in Miss Courtland's and Charlie Steel's rooms. The upper floor was in darkness. If Harriet had stolen down for a kiss through the pantry window, she was going to bed in the dark.

Cautiously I approached the work-room window which I had only pretended to latch. It was rather difficult to open it without making a noise, but I did it and clambered in on the top of that great album in the window seat, and very nearly dislodged it. I am pretty agile for a man of my weight, but I don't get enough practice to be an expert burglar.

Once in the room, I groped to the door, locked it and switched on the light. Then I went to the

writing-table, and opened the drawer to find the brown paper parcel labelled "Gerrans".

In my own mind I had no suspicion of Sir Walter, and hence I had betrayed nothing when Mr. Treherne told me of his request; but I have known detectives before now fail because they took things for granted, and so Sir Walter was not going to have those papers until I had examined them.

I found a very long pedigree with sundry corrections and queries, copies of certificates of christenings, marriages, and burials—careful notes stating the pros and cons for certain identifications—A very complicated and to me unintelligible discussion as to the rights of the Gerran's family to display certain quarterings.—Extracts from wills showing relationships or accounting for the devolution of property.—An incomplete history of the Manor of Aldersford—a rather caustic criticism of county histories—and a considerable correspondence with officials at the Heralds College, with parsons about fees for searching their registers, with the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, and with fellow students. She had even discovered the missing record of a marriage in the Register of Bergen op Zoom, which in the seventeenth century was apparently the winter quarters of the English regiments in the service of the Prince of Orange. She was evidently a keen, industrious and particularly exact lady.

The only thing, however, that interested me was a full account of the trial in 1810, when William Gerrans, aged five, suing by his mother as best friend, claimed the baronetcy and estates as the only and lawfully begotten son of his father, Walter Gerrans deceased, the eldest son of Sir Walter Gerrans, the last baronet.

The account was given in great detail. It took me more than half an hour to read, and my only surprise at the end was, that the woman calling herself Mrs. Gerrans had not been locked up. Mr.

Denton was right, and Mr. Davies, the solicitor, was ill-informed.

The Walter Gerrans of a century ago was not an estimable character. He belonged to the Tom and Jerry school, and boasted of being a Corinthian. He certainly frequented Brighton but was probably only on the outskirts of the Regent's set. His reputation on the Turf, in the Ring, and with the ladies was notorious. He was the sort of man who might have deluded an innocent girl into an invalid marriage; but was not likely to have contracted a valid marriage with one who was very little better than a prostitute.

The woman claiming to be Mrs. Gerrans was proved to have lived under the protection of more than one man, before she obtained a situation as a governess in a peer's family by aid of references which turned out to be forged. In this house Walter Gerrans met her and persuaded her to elope with him. The story of the secret marriage in an unknown place, by an unknown parson was entirely uncorroborated. For the next six years Walter Gerrans had undoubtedly visited her in a cottage at Norwood where she lived under the name of Mrs. Walters. But this was not all. The defence in the trial contended that the child said to be five was really at least eighteen months older and must have been born before Walter Gerrans met the lady.

In 1810 there was no registration of birth, and no christening certificate was forthcoming. The lady had conveniently forgotten the name of the church in London where she alleged the rite had been performed. No witnesses appeared who could remember the child as a baby, but witnesses from Norwood were forthcoming who declared that when they first knew the mother and child five years previously, the latter must have been at least two years old.

I closed the record, tied up the papers, unlocked the door, switched off the light, climbed out of the window, confused with my hands the mould in which I had trod, and went home to bed satisfied.

PART THREE

Thursday, September 24th, 1924

CHAPTER I

6 A.M.—7.30 A.M.

THE landlady was a little querulous when I arrived home at a quarter to twelve. I had given her no warning, and in fact I had not anticipated being so late. I explained that out of consideration for the young gentleman who was so unwell, I had not been in my sitting-room all the evening, and was going straight to bed. She was not propitiated, for it was quite clear that she did not believe me. She locked the front door with a snap, saying hers was a respectable house, as if anyone would doubt it.

Next morning I was once more in my sitting-room at 6 a.m. to make notes on the previous day's work. It is an aid to work out one's results in this way; and the Chief if an inquiry fails—it does sometimes—likes to be assured that I have reasoned correctly from such facts as were known.

On coming to Aldersford it seemed possible that the murder might have been committed by anyone of the inhabitants in the surrounding neighbourhood or by someone coming from outside, but the result of my inquiries has been to limit the possibilities. Colonel Sandon coming down the Coldmorton Road had met no one coming in the opposite direction except Sir Walter Gerrans and a woman with a perambulator and some children. He could remember nothing passing him about that time except Lord Treholm's car.

It is true he may not be a very observant person and may not have a retentive memory. Brown, the butler, asserts that two men were working in the

stables of the Manor, and if this is so the murderer did not escape that way. This again has to be corroborated. Thirdly Old Gunton cannot remember anyone who interested him passing towards Aldersford. It is true that he nullified his own evidence by confessing that he sometimes dozed, but he only said that out of loyalty to the young Squire. Dick Gerrans was on the path through Farmer Grime's field when the shot was fired and can testify that no murderer escaped that way. The evidence is not conclusive at present, but it all points to the fact that the murder was not committed by a stranger but by someone who lived on the spot or whose presence on the road would excite no remark.

The Rifle.—If the above reasoning is probable, Dick's rifle becomes of importance, for the Super has been unable to trace any similar weapon in the neighbourhood. It is, in consequence, of the first importance to know who had it between half-past four on Saturday afternoon and half-past five on Tuesday when it was found in the gun-room of the Manor.

Do the *Copper-coloured hairpins* provide a clue? Dozens of people in Aldersford may use them for all I know, and it is not necessary to believe that the person who lost the hairpin found the rifle. The fact remains that three women at The Elms use such hairpins, and it is not an unreasonable hypothesis to assume that the particular hairpin belonged to one of them.

Suppose Elsie found the rifle, what would she do with it? In all probability she would give it to her young man, the under-keeper, to restore to the Manor. The under-keeper who, according to the Super, can prove his alibi, certainly visited the Manor after four-thirty on Monday and may have been content to leave it casually in the back passage. No one notices whether a keeper has, or has not, a gun. On the other hand it was Harriet's afternoon out, and therefore Elsie probably had to be at home

to answer the door. Anyhow, a question to Elsie will settle that question. She, like Dick, does not know how to lie.

If Harriet found it, what would she do? She would probably hand it over to the butler. If she did so, he lied about where he found it and its condition when found, with the hope of getting Dick into trouble with his father. I am still wondering what prank that innocent child has played on Mr. Brown. But Harriet went to Badenhams. I have no evidence of the time when she arrived there. It is a three-mile walk. High tea at the "Cross" we may guess is at six. Billy's scout had meant to attend his troop meeting. Do scouts in the country gather at six or seven? Probably at the later hour; patrol leaders would be over fourteen and at work. Yes, it is possible that Harriet might take a walk in the Town Meadows before starting for Badenhams, but it does not seem likely.

Suppose Miss Courtland found the rifle, what would she do with it? Naturally she would send it up to the Manor by George Stevens with an explanatory note. Did she do so, and did George Stevens retain the rifle, and is he the murderer of Mrs. de Morville? I think not. First, there is Dick's evidence, which seems to preclude that possibility. Secondly, he had already an automatic pistol of his own, and if he had contemplated the deed he would not have used a rifle; or, if he had, he would have buried it as he buried the automatic pistol. He would not have run the risk of being seen carrying it up to the Manor, or of being detected when leaving it in the passage.

Next there is that flapping window which neither Harriet nor Elsie opened. If Charlie Steel had opened it, the noise would have been noticed by Harriet or Cook before Monday night. The state of the room as described by Billy is also suspicious, and I am sure that the first sheet of Monday's *Times* with Mrs. de Morville's name upon it has some meaning, though I am not clear about it. I have

found out about the blank counterfoil, but not what the notes were intended for. I have a shrewd suspicion that George Stevens has them now. Dick saw him running towards the gap in the holly hedge which leads to the lawn. He without doubt first discovered the murder and took the notes. He then ran back to get the basket so as to have an alibi if the notes were inquired after. Who is George Stevens? Is he George Courtland's son? Charlie Steel's report of his aunt's cryptic remark and agitation suggested this to me. If so, I don't quite understand his little game.

The discovery mentioned in Mrs. de Morville's letter I connect with the cream jug bearing the Gerrans's arms. Brown had been selling the Gerrans's plate in Dolminster. Mrs. de Morville must have started making inquiries at the Deanery when she lunched there on Saturday. I imagine that she received fresh information from Mrs. Ackroyd on Monday afternoon. What became of that letter? Presumably it was in the handbag when Mrs. de Morville was shot. Presumably it had no interest for George Stevens. One can't be sure, for Billy found Stevens and Brown in friendly conversation this morning. Perhaps, however, Harriet discovered it and is sheltering her lover. Brown apparently has another young woman in Dolminster whom he visits. I don't suppose that even Stevens believed in the sister.

This brings me to the *three envelopes*. Now that I know Brown and Harriet are courting, that is explained. Harriet is discreet, perhaps she is coy. She does not want her love-making to be gossiped about. She has not sufficient opportunities for meeting her lover. What does she do? Every night she takes the little dog for a run before going to bed and drops a love-letter through that broken paling into that thick plantation. No one is likely to find it but the love-lorn Brown who knows the place. But has this anything to do with the murder?

Well, I think I know enough to have a shrewd suspicion about who killed Mrs. de Morville, but I have not got anything in the nature of proof, nor any inkling about the motive which actuated the crime.

CHAPTER II

7.30 A.M.—7.45 A.M.

HAVING finished my notes, I opened the door into Billy Smith's bedroom and found him sleeping peacefully. I filled a sponge with cold water and applied it. Billy, I regret to say, began the day with profanity.

"Now Billy," said I, "you will be good enough to get up. I hope you have quite recovered from your bilious attack. You will remove the crumbs and ginger-beer bottles carefully so as to leave no traces of your midnight revels. You may play about with that motor-bike for a bit. You may even find that something has gone wrong in its mechanism. I don't understand the horrid things, you do. Finding something wrong, what more natural than that you should look up your childhood's friend, George Stevens, a motor mechanic? I am sure he will be able to put it right, and you will reward him with a drink, or even two. If, after parting with him, you see me coming down the street you may retire to your own apartment, and leaving the communicating doors ajar you may take down in shorthand the no doubt interesting conversation which will ensue, after I have introduced George to my apartment. You've got it?"

"It seems rather a low-down game."

"It is in the cause of justice, Billy—the sacred cause of justice. Besides, between you and me I don't think that unlicked cub is going to suffer anything more than a very salutary fright. You were quite ready to charge him with murder."

"Then I thought he was a murderer, and that makes a difference."

"All right. That's settled. You won't ride the bike to-day. After that bilious attack it would be imprudent. The motherly old lady downstairs, who does not like me, will counsel you against it. You will go comfortably by train to Dolminster by the one-ten. Remember, Billy, there are cheap tickets to-day, you will see the glorious Cathedral, the most perfect example of Early English in England—and there is no Early English on the Continent. The best view is from the outside. So you need not go in unless you are especially curious about the anthem. The police station, which is not, I regret to say, Early English, might yet be visited and you may inquire about Manton's trade in old silver. If Mr. Brown is travelling by the one-ten, it would only be sociable if you travelled with him, and a natural interest in your friend will lead you to find out how he amuses himself. You might come back with him also; and if you get really chummy you might state your wish to see the wonderful collection of stuffed creatures at the Manor. He might show them to you while Sir Walter is at the funeral to-morrow. An articted clerk with a prodigal nature might well be good for a five-bob tip.—Yes, and if the police at Dolminster wish to pull off a 'cop' at once tell them they musn't. Tell them the thief must be caught here and they must wait until they hear from this end. Murder takes precedence of theft, but Scotland Yard won't appear on the lower charge. They shall have all the credit."

"You are getting rather complicated," said Billy underneath the bedclothes, "and I don't half understand."

"Well, you will find correct information in your handbook to Early English Architecture if you look there about ten to one. Now get out of bed." With that I suddenly pulled the bedclothes off Billy and left him.

CHAPTER III

7.45 A.M.—8.45 A.M.

DOWNSTAIRS while I ate my breakfast I considered the package I had received from the Yard.

They had verified all George Stevens's statements about himself, and even traced Austin Whiting's chief chauffeur, who was setting up a small garage at Reading. The said chauffeur had said that George Stevens was a very good driver and a very good mechanic—had a natural gift for such things. He had, moreover, offered the said George a small share in his business if he could find £100; and that a lady at Aldersford had been making inquiries on the subject.

"I think," I said to myself, "that I now know all about George Stevens. It is clear too that he did not at once send the Treasury Notes to Reading. That is part of his half-baked caution. He does not trust the post."

The Yard also sent me particulars about seventeen gentlemen's servants who were known to the police and some of them had very unsavoury records. Most of them could not possibly be my friend Mr. Brown; but a certain Thomas Sharp seemed probable.

A slight dark man, with brown eyes and an impenetrable face. Age forty: was for some years valet to the Hon. Percy Warrington, was convicted of robbing his master and sentenced to a short term of imprisonment. Came out six months ago and disappeared. Police suspect him of more than one sensational jewel robbery, which had taken place at country houses which

he had visited with his master, but had no proof. He was married to an ex-lady's maid—very smart woman, who kept a small lodging-house in Kensington until her husband's conviction, and had then flitted without paying her rent, owing a great deal of money to various tradesmen.

"Well," thought I, "if William Brown is Thomas Sharp, where does Harriet come in? Neither her person or her savings can be sufficiently attractive to a man of his past." Then I remembered the pantry window, the very valuable Georgian plate, and how I had all but run into Brown coming out of the back drive last night.

I drank a second cup of coffee; and read in the *Daily Intelligence* Harry Holloway's account of the inquest, Harry Holloway's interview with myself, and Harry Holloway's views on the danger of employing servants in these days when the land was honeycombed with Soviet plots. It was all very interesting.

I then crossed the road and looked in on the Super for a heart-to-heart talk. He was very interested in the cream jug, in Brown's constant visits to Dolminster, in Manton's and the smart lady. He was really pleased that I was leaving this matter to him and did not propose to interfere. He agreed that William Brown ought to be arrested in Aldersford and not in Dolminster, and he quite saw my point that I must have immediate access to Brown after his arrest, and before he had time to invent a new tale.

I left him talking over the telephone to his opposite number at Dolminster, and rather suggesting that the police in that city ought to have been rather more wide awake.

CHAPTER IV

9 A.M.—9.15 A.M.

COMING out of the Police Station I had the misfortune to run into Mr. Fulton on his way from Station Road to the Bank. Mr. Fulton lives in a small new villa with as many old world angles and protuberances as a young architect could devise. Give me the square rooms and solid comfort of Brixton—but my life is a series of romances: Mr. Fulton's romance is in his home.

Mr. Fulton's eyes gleamed when he saw me. His key was in the Chubb lock of the Bank. As he slipped in, I noticed a furtive hand beckoning me to follow, and, not at the moment having anything to do, I did so.

"This is a most fortunate meeting," said Mr. Fulton as I reached his sanctum. "I have been longing to see you, and to know how we are getting on. I said to my wife at breakfast this morning, 'I am longing to call at the 'Rose and Crown', but it does not do for fellow-conspirators to be seen together.' I was right, eh?"

"Quite right," I said, and then, winking at him, added, "Everything is proceeding according to plan, and by to-morrow night I hope to finish my inquiry."

"Now that is interesting—very interesting. Of course, I understand that you tell me this in the strictest confidence. I shall not breathe a word. I was so surprised at the inquest yesterday that nothing came out about that cheque, but, of course, the police are right to be reticent. Nobody knows anything about it except you and myself." After a pause he added: "And my wife."

"I am so glad that you have been silent on the subject."

"Yes, would you believe it? No sooner had you gone out yesterday than a red-headed young man came in to ask questions, but I soon instructed him in the secrecy which I have to observe in my professional capacity. I am not to be tampered with. But it just shows, does it not, that you are being shadowed, and those involved in this terrible crime are losing no chance of defeating the ends of justice? I am pretty sure that I was being followed myself as I went home to lunch. I was very careful about locking up last night."

"The police will not forget you," I said solemnly. "Superintendent Thomas is a very vigilant officer."

"Of course he is—that was just what I was saying to Sir Walter when he came in to cash a cheque yesterday. Of course, I did not tell even him of our secret, but I mentioned casually that I had seen you—there was no harm in that; and I tried to repeat that witty thing you said about a goose, but he did not seem to like it—perhaps I got it wrong—and Sir Walter is a very reserved man. When I told my wife, she said he had no sense of humour."

"And now, Mr. Fulton, may I ask you a question: Has Mr. Charles Steel an account here?"

"Certainly, his aunt opened one for him with £100 when he went to Sandhurst, and his father pays in his allowance the day before quarter-day. I think he has given an order on his bankers to do so."

"I don't want to know Mr. Steel's balance, but I can guess it is small. I think I can recommend at this time that you would not do wrong to allow him an overdraft for anything in reason. He may have expenses unforeseen through his aunt's death."

"Quite so! Ah, here is my cashier arriving five minutes earlier than usual. Dear me, would you like to go out the back way? No? Well, he is very discreet. There are not yet many people about."

CHAPTER V

9.15 A.M.—10.15 A.M.

ON returning to my room I sat down in the window and wrote out all I suspected of Mr. Brown and suggestions for Billy to follow. Before I had finished I saw Billy starting for The Elms, and just after placing the notes in the Guide to Early English Architecture, I saw Mr. Davies, the lawyer, coming towards the "Rose and Crown", deep in conversation with Mr. Brown. "Ah," I thought, "he is giving the butler his version of the ancient scandal of the Gerrans family, and I expect he is going to bore me with it also."

I was right—I generally am—Mr. Davies paused at the "Rose and Crown" and a few minutes later was shown into my sitting-room.

After mutual greetings, he sat down opposite to me in the window-seat and leaning impressively on the small table between us began :

"Like all my fellow-townsmen, I am intensely interested in this brutal murder. I may say I am shocked at it. I do not pretend that I agreed with Mrs. de Morville while she was alive—in fact we had many passages of arms on various public bodies; but like all my fellow-townsmen, I am determined that justice shall be vindicated, and that the criminal, whoever he may be, and however highly placed, shall not escape the penalty his crime has deserved."

"Quite so, Mr. Davies. This is very interesting. I gather you have come with evidence which I can use."

"Not exactly with evidence, but I do want to call

your attention to the very mysterious note which Mrs. de Morville wrote to Sir Walter Gerrans shortly before her death. Sir Walter affected to treat the matter lightly in the witness-box yesterday afternoon. It was his evident endeavour to minimize the importance of that communication, which filled my mind with suspicion."

"Yes, Mr. Davies, and of what are you suspicious?"

"Excuse me, Inspector, may I be permitted to unfold what I have come to tell you in my own way? You are aware, for you were in the 'Rose and Crown' two nights ago, of the precarious tenure on which Sir Walter has the baronetcy and estates. The finding of a missing certificate would deprive him of all or most of what he possesses. That certificate may any day come to light. I have brought with me a copy of *The Times* that you may see how a certain Walter Gerrans, of 2, Columbia Road, Earl's Court, S.W., is offering £100 to anyone who will make the discovery. You see in consequence that a man of means believes in his claim and is prepared to prosecute it with vigour."

"But what has this to do with Mrs. de Morville?"

"Mrs. de Morville, as I thought you knew, was a very skilful genealogist. She has to my knowledge made exhaustive researches in many parish registers. Is it possible that she made the discovery, and that her note to Sir Walter was to prepare him for what she had to tell?"

"I see what you are driving at. You believe Sir Walter Gerrans shot Mrs. de Morville in order to suppress evidence which would have been his ruin."

"I did not say so. I don't think I have even suggested that Sir Walter Gerrans is the murderer. I am merely putting facts before you which I think deserve examination."

"You will remember that Sir Walter did not receive this mysterious notification until after the lady was dead,"

"I am not forgetting it, sir. I am a lawyer trained to deal with evidence. Now, Mr. Brown, the butler at the Manor, informs me that Sir Walter visited Mrs. de Morville on Sunday night."

"Oh, he knows that, does he? Where was Mr. Brown?"

"I don't know, sir, neither do I think his whereabouts relevant to the subject we are discussing. I would suggest that Mrs. de Morville's researches were well known to Sir Walter, and that he may have been aware that she was 'getting warm', to use a phrase which I have heard from my children at their games."

"In fact, you accuse Sir Walter of knowing where the missing certificate is?"

"God forbid! I accuse no man. I have only felt it my duty as an inhabitant of the town and jealous for its honour, as a man representing law and order, and zealous for justice, that certain considerations, which I at least consider important, should not be overlooked."

"Well, Mr. Davies, I am sure I ought to be grateful for your manifestation of jealousy and zeal. May I ask if you have ever read the report of *Gerrans v. Gerrans* in 1810?"

"The Law Reports do not go back so far."

"But there are very full reports of this particular case in print, and I, at least, have taken the trouble to study them."

Mr. Davies was surprised, and showed it. I went on:

"I think it extremely improbable that Walter Gerrans married the woman known as Mary Walters in 1805—so improbable that I would not mind offering you one hundred to one against it. That is not all. If the marriage certificate were discovered, I am sure that the gentleman at 2, Columbia Road, Earl's Court, would fail to establish the paternity of his grandfather. No, Mr. Davies, I fear you have been accepting a confused local tradition instead of seeking authentic information."

"How, then, do you account for the advertiser in *The Times*, who is risking his money?"

"He's not risking much, and he is not alone. There are hundreds of cranks in the world who go about believing that if they had their rights they would be dukes. You, Mr. Davies, as a shrewd man of the world, would not take up one of these claims on spec. Now, would you?"

"Of course, I should have to assure myself that there was a reasonable chance of success, but I am not taking up a case 'on spec' at present. What you say may be quite true, but it does not explain away Mrs. de Morville's note. What would she, a genealogist like Mrs. de Morville, have discovered to cause Sir Walter trouble?"

"There, Mr. Davies, I have the advantage of you. I know, but at present cannot tell you more than that the discovery was only made because Mrs. de Morville had a knowledge of heraldry. I can also tell you that I have read through all Mrs. de Morville's papers on the Gerrans family, and have found nothing that would justify your suspicions."

Mr. Davies rose to go. He was getting uncomfortable and wanted to be nasty.

"I cannot help thinking, Inspector, that you have been spending a great deal of time in defending the reputation of our so-called county families; but I must remind you that we live in a democratic age, and that the British public expect you to find the murderer."

"I shall do my best to satisfy the British public."

"No doubt, and the people of Aldersford are naturally anxious to know in what deserted house you spent last night."

"I spent yesterday evening at The Elms in the company of Mr. Treherne, and the landlady will tell you that I reached home at eleven-forty-five."

"*The Vigilant*, sir, is a well-informed journal," said Mr. Davies, and he unfolded a newspaper which he had carried beneath his arm, and pointed to a paragraph, which ran:

When Inspector Frost kindly saw me off at Aldersford Junction, he was full of hope that the mystery would soon be cleared up. He was very reserved, but he hinted at a midnight vigil in a lonely house. He had provided himself with food, and when his coat blew open as we passed through the swing-door of the refreshment-room, I noticed in his hip-pocket what was evidently a service revolver.

"Ah!" said I. "What a thrill for the readers of *The Vigilant*."

"It is, as I have said, very well-informed."

"Of course, but in proof of what I said, you may ask your friend, the butler, if he did not come out of The Elms drive at eleven o'clock."

"My friend! Inspector, you must realize the difference of our positions."

"Oh, I thought in these democratic days these miserable class distinctions were disappearing."

"Good morning, sir. I would remind you that members of the public have a right to expect civility from servants of the state."

"Certainly," said I, rising to open the door for him. I accompanied him to the top of the landing. As he turned his broad back to me, my foot longed to rise, my eye saw the exact place where it should reach. In imagination, I saw Mr. Davies lifted up and descending rapidly downstairs. What unnecessary limitations to appropriate action are imposed by civilization!

CHAPTER VI

10.15 A.M.—11.45 A.M.

THAT unpleasant man almost made me lose George Stevens. As I returned to the bow window he and Billy were just coming out of the stable-yard. They entered the porch, no doubt for the drink. I had no time to lose, but went down the back stairs, out at the back door, and reached the street without meeting them. I walked as far as the stile into the Town Meadows, paused there for a couple of minutes to admire the view, and then slowly retraced my steps. In this way I just chanced to meet Mr. George Stevens about ten yards on his homeward way from the "Rose and Crown".

"You're just the man I wanted to meet."

"Am I?" said Stevens, looking at me with suspicion.

"Yes. I want a nice long talk with you, so you had better come up to my room at the 'Rose and Crown'."

"I have my work to do," grumbled Stevens.

"Just at present you are very much your own master, I imagine. There is no longer a lady to chivy you round."

"I've got to get on, anyhow," said Stevens, trying to pass me.

"No, young fellow, you don't," said I, changing my tone. "Either you come back with me quietly to the 'Rose and Crown' or it will be my painful duty to arrest you."

"What for?"

"May be for murder, may be for robbery, may be for both. The Police Station is only just across the

way, and the Super is watching us from the doorway."

Stevens paused for a moment, and then turned round and walked sullenly at my side the few yards to the inn. In silence we went up the stairs and entered my room. I locked the door, and then he turned on me and said:

"Now, what is it?"

"You may sit down. It will take time, and a man of my weight sits when he can. Now, Stevens, have you seen this pistol and these cartridges, which were found buried in that bed you were digging up when I saw you on Tuesday?"

The man's eyes opened with terror, and his jaw dropped.

He exclaimed: "How did you get them?"

"You admit they are yours?"

"I—I won't admit anything."

"Now that's silly, you know; but it does not matter what you admit, for I am now going to ask you to hand over the £105 in Treasury Notes which you took out of Mrs. de Morville's handbag after she was shot."

The man's hand had gone convulsively to his breast-pocket as I spoke, and his tongue faltered as he said: "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Now," said I at a venture, "that's silly, also. You don't think that you could do a thing like that and no one see you?"

"Then there was somebody at the window!" exclaimed Stevens involuntarily, and I understood Billy's description of the boy who never did anything wrong without being found out.

"Yes, the box-room window at the top of the house. Who was it?"

"I don't know. I only saw a hand."

"That's a pity," I said. "If you had seen the person it might have saved you from being hanged."

"I didn't do it. I swear I didn't do it. You know I didn't do it."

"I don't think you did the murder, but I don't know what a jury might think. There's that pistol and there are those notes, which the police will find on you at the station, if you don't hand them over now. It might be pretty black for you."

With a great effort the man put his hand into his pocket and brought out a packet which he had wrapped in newspaper.

"There they are. Take 'em, and let me go," and he leaned on the table and sobbed. "They were mine. She had promised them to me. I only took what were mine."

I hate to see a great big hulking chap like Stevens break down and sob; but I left him alone for a minute, undid the package, and counted the notes. There were a hundred and four of them.

"One is missing," I said.

"You damned devil!" he shouted. "Isn't it enough? I've given you all I have—all my chance of making a living, and are you going to hand me over to the police, after all?"

"Oh, you think I am pocketing these notes as the price of silence. You silly idiot! No, that is not done by the C.I.D., whatever the Tcheka may do. You would hang right enough if I thought you had done it, but I don't. When you've pulled yourself together and become a man again, we will have a talk, and then I will walk round with you to The Elms, and you shall give those notes with your own hand to Mr. Treherne, the lawyer."

"He'll send me to prison," wailed Stevens.

"He may, I don't say you don't deserve it—but I don't think he will. I should not be altogether surprised if you ultimately received the money, but you will have first to prove your claim to it."

By this time Stevens had ceased to sob. He sat up, gaping at me—completely puzzled, and looking, oh, so stupid! All the insolence had been knocked out of him, and for a few minutes I kept quite silent. Silence is very devastating to the half-educated.

"Now," I said at length, "I believe your real name is George Courtland."

"How do you know that?"

"The secret police have means of finding out about people. You take warning, and don't in future be fooled into conspiracies of any sort. You are George Courtland?"

"Yes, but nobody knows it. My mother's name was Stevens. My father called himself Stevens, too. He had come down in the world. He was ashamed of himself. I can't remember him, and I don't want to. He drank, and my mother had a life of it. I am my mother's son. I don't belong to the Courtlands. I belong to the down-trodden proletariat, and I'm proud of it."

"As a boy you lived in Clapham and went to the Wellington Road School, and I don't believe your character was particularly good. Your mother was still alive."

"Don't you say anything against my mother. Do you hear? She was poor enough. We hadn't always enough to eat, while those Courtlands were living in luxury on our money."

"Tut, tut, boy, it wasn't your money, and I don't suppose 'those Courtlands' knew that there were such people as Mrs. Stevens and her son."

"One of 'em did, anyhow. I don't know which. My father wrote to his favourite sister when he was dying, and told her about mother and me. A fat lot of good that did. A lawyer man came and paid for the funeral—the parish would have done it almost as handsomely. Oh, your aristocrats are kind to the poor! Once, when we had put most of our things up the spout, mother wrote again to the same sister, but the letter came back in a yellow envelope, and there was scribbled on it: 'Gone away; address unknown.' I'm glad they didn't help. I shouldn't like to be beholden to them."

"Yet, you tell me you were going to accept money from Mrs. de Morville."

"That's different. She had to give me that to

save her pride, and I meant to pay her back, every penny of it—so there!”

“Now, what made you come to Aldersford? To make money out of your despised relations?”

“No, I didn’t. I answered an advertisement. I didn’t know the name of de Morville, and wish I’d never heard it. It was only when I saw that Miss Courtland, with her condescending smile on a poor devil of a chauffeur, that I said to myself: ‘That’s my aunt, whose got the money I ought to have.’”

“And you thought you would get some of it back?”

“No, I didn’t. I didn’t like the job, and I didn’t mean to stay, and I didn’t mean to let ’em know. I meant to go to America and get out of this country, where there is no justice for a man like me. Then Jones, the man who was at Whiting’s with me, wrote to say he had left, and was setting up a garage at Reading, and would let me in if I could put up £100. It was then I tackled Mrs. de Morville, and I think the news that her long-lost nephew was planting her potatoes fairly took the starch out of her.”

“I think you might speak respectfully of a dead woman, who was going to give you £100.”

“Respectfully! Good Lord! Was she respectful to my dead mother? She wanted proof, she did, she wanted to see my mother’s marriage lines; and I had them, as luck would have it, and that gravelled her. She said she had never heard of me or of her brother’s marriage, but do you think I believed her? Not I. She was very particular, and made me promise that I would not trouble her sister. I guess she was the sort of old girl who kept things to herself. Anyhow, she promised to make inquiries about Jones and the Reading business, and on Monday morning she told me it was all right and that I should have the money before night.”

“You ought to have been grateful.”

“Not a bit of it. It was just her pride. She didn’t want all her fine friends to know that she had a

nephew like me—not educated, you know, no fine manners. The only education I had was the sort a Capitalist State gives to the children of wage-slaves, so that they may make money for their betters.”

“That’s your story. And I believe it’s true. You are not a nice young man, George Stevens, but so far you’ve not had much of a chance. Technically, you were a thief when you took those notes, but perhaps Mr. Treherne may see it in another light. You are quite sure about that hand at the window? What sort of a hand?”

“Just a hand. As I looked up I thought it was someone trying to shut the window. I jumped farther back to see who it was, but the hand had disappeared and the window was still open.”

“You will swear to that?”

“Yes, as often as you like.”

“Then let us go and see Mr. Treherne.”

Ten minutes later a somewhat surprised Harriet showed us into the workroom at The Elms, where we found Mr. Treherne in an arm-chair, reading a volume of manuscript which he closed and put away with some embarrassment.

“Mr. Treherne,” said I, “I have discovered that the late Mrs. de Morville had intended to set Stevens up in a motor business, and had promised him £100 last Monday night. After Mrs. de Morville was shot, the foolish young man found this bundle of notes fallen out of Mrs. de Morville’s open handbag. At the time he thought he was justified in appropriating them as he knew Mrs. de Morville’s intentions. This morning he has made a full confession to me, and I have brought him here to return the notes. I may say that Scotland Yard yesterday made inquiries in Reading, and can in part corroborate the young man’s tale.”

“Good Lord!” said Stevens under his breath.

Mr. Treherne looked at Stevens and then at me. He said: “This requires serious consideration.” Then, looking at Stevens, he added: “You may go.

I can promise nothing, but I do not think that you will necessarily suffer by your very proper restitution of the notes."

Stevens went out, and Mr. Treherne continued: "The diary which, curiously enough, was exactly where you prophesied it might be, tells me all about that young man. Something will, of course, have to be done for him."

"You have the diary. May I see it?"

"I should prefer not to show it to you now. Again, the diary requires much anxious consideration, but I can assure you that it contains nothing which would be of the slightest use to you in detecting the murderer."

"I shall be the judge of that—but you quite understand, Mr. Treherne, that I shall insist on seeing it?"

"Will you give me until to-morrow night for consideration?"

"Certainly. I do not intend to make an arrest until Saturday morning."

CHAPTER VII

11.45 A.M.—12.15 P.M.

OUTSIDE The Elms I met Charlie Steel loafing about. He had the air of one who was having a miserable time. He was glad to see me, and asked :

“Have you found those notes, Inspector?”

“Yes, I have just handed them over to Mr. Treherne, but I should not advise you just at present to ask too many questions.”

“How I hate all this mystery. Living at The Elms seems to me living on a volcano. Even Harriet seems to have the twitters.”

“Try cook,” said I. “She’s all right. And, by the by, I was talking to the bank manager this morning, and was surprised to find how ready he was to grant overdrafts. I am going up to the Manor stables now, and shall be going to the Old Mill this afternoon. If you have nothing else to do, you might come with me.”

“Right-o!” said Charlie as I passed up the Manor back drive.

At the stables I found a chauffeur and another man at work washing a car, and introduced myself to them.

“Were you both here on Monday afternoon from four o’clock onwards?”

They said “Yes,” and glanced at one another.

“Did anyone come this way?”

“Yes. The gardener from The Elms.”

“Mr. Brown was with you then?”

“Yes. He went up to the Manor soon afterwards.”

"Who went down?"

"No one but Sir Walter at about a quarter-past four."

"You are sure no one came up here between four-fifteen and five?"

"Sir Walter and another gentleman came up just before five."

"Well, that's that," I said. "You may some day have to give that evidence in court."

As I was turning away, Sir Walter approached. He was going to say "Good morning" and pass on, but I stopped him.

"I am particularly anxious to know whom you saw on the road last Monday before meeting Colonel Sandon."

"No one in particular. Well, let me see. I met Grimes, the farmer I told you about, going into Aldersford. We had a few words about the weather. I don't think there was anyone else. Lord Treholm's car passed me just before meeting the Colonel—I wondered at the time if he had been to the Manor—and a woman with a perambulator and three children. I noticed them because one of the little girls was well in the road when the car passed."

"You don't know the woman's name?"

"No, but I know who she is. She is the wife of Grimes's cowman, and their cottage is just the other side of the farmyard."

"You saw no one coming back?"

"No one. Yes, I did. The woman's husband. No one else."

"Thank you, Sir Walter. Your evidence agrees with Colonel Sandon's. Only he forgot the cowman. Gunton's evidence on the way into Aldersford from The Elms is not altogether satisfactory. He was sitting at the lodge-gate, but confesses to dozing. The farmer may corroborate him. And then I shall have proved that the murderer did not go away."

Sir Walter looked at me, and said: "What then?"

"Then the murderer," I said, "will have to be found in a very small circle."

CHAPTER VIII

2 P.M.—3 P.M.

IF Charlie Steel was miserable this morning, he was worried when I met him at The Elms gate at two o'clock.

"I say, Mr. Treherne has told us about the notes and about George Stevens—who he is. It is all rather rotten."

"Why?"

"Well, how am I to treat the chap? I've always loathed the sight of him. He looks a thorough bad egg, but he is my cousin. I don't want to know him, and I don't want to be a beastly snob, either."

"I don't think George Stevens wants to know you, or to have anything to do with you, either. If you ignore him he will say you're a snob, if you try to be friendly he will let you know pretty plainly that he does not require your condescension. George Stevens's hatred is of that thorough-going kind that you could not do the right thing if you tried. It is not merely that he has been brought up in poverty, he has been brought up with a grievance, believing that he was kept out of his rights. Nothing has ever gone well with him. Nothing ever does go well with men who have tempers like that. All we can hope for him is a prosperous career in that garage. A little prosperity would probably improve him. Anyhow, I don't think that you need worry. He won't interfere with you. What did your aunt say?"

"She would not believe it at first. Then Mr. Treherne told us not only what you had said, but that your story was confirmed by Scotland Yard, and that he had found the same story in Aunt Martha's

papers. 'She never told me,' said Aunt Clare. 'But then, Martha always tried to shield me from worry. Martha was so kind. No one will ever shield me any more.' Old Treherne did not like it very much. He said: 'You may rely on my doing everything in my power to save you trouble.' But Aunt Clare wasn't taking any. She said: 'It is very kind of you, but I am a little surprised that you have not told me this before.' 'I only knew it this morning,' said old Treherne. 'I came across it in Martha's papers.' 'Where are they?' asked Aunt Clare? 'I hope to show you everything on Saturday morning. I would rather not do so before. There are several little points which need careful consideration.' 'Of course,' said Aunt Clare, 'I am entirely in your hands, and so grateful.' It was all very rotten, don't you know. I don't understand things at all. Old Treherne is so very—what shall I say?—reserved. He's nervous, somehow. I can't understand it. I don't know what I ought to do. It's all so absolutely rotten."

"You must pull yourself together and play the man. I don't know what you can do, but I am sorry for you. I think, if I were you, I should say my prayers."

The boy glanced at me quickly, and after that we walked on for a minute or so in silence. Then in order to distract his thoughts, I asked: "Do you know Dick Gerrans?"

"Rather! He's really rather a decent kid. He'll have a lot to learn, of course, when he goes to Eton next summer term. He goes back to his prep. school on Saturday. I expect he's glad. He must be pretty lonely up at the Manor."

"Have you seen much of him?"

"Yes. He was always coming down to The Elms for a lesson in tennis, but it is rather a bore lobbing balls over the net for a silly young idiot to hit right out of the court into the shrubbery. I preferred going up to the Manor to bowl to him. He's what I call

a natural cricketer, but he's had no proper coaching. I am not much good at cricket myself, but I think Dick will come on. He got up a match against Coldmorton under fourteen. It was played in the park. I was one of the umpires, and I had to give him out l.b.w. in his first over. I will say this for him: he's a thorough little sportsman. He didn't grouse, though it must have been perfectly sickening for him, especially as that little beast, Davies, the lawyer's son, made top score for Aldersford—and Dick does bar Davies. I was jolly glad when he made thirty in the second innings, and carried his bat. Coldmorton only won by five runs. It was quite an exciting finish."

"Well, here we are at the Old Mill—very picturesque, isn't it? I hear it is famed for its ginger-beer. Would you like some?"

"No, thanks," said Charlie, with a perplexed look at me.

"I am going to try it," said I. "Come in."

We walked down the little cobbled path between the dahlias and Michaelmas daisies, and entered by an ivy-covered porch into a long, low room with horse-hair furniture and with preposterous china dogs on the mantelpiece. In the corner, utterly out of place with its surroundings, was a dignified grandfather-clock in a beautiful walnut case.

A young woman came in, and I ordered a glass of ginger-beer, while Charlie looked out of the window, having refused all refreshment.

"That's a very fine clock," I remarked. "I suppose it is not for sale?"

"No, it isn't," said the young woman. "There are lots of dealers come out here. They are all after that clock. Sir Walter Gerrans would give a mint of money for it. It came from the Manor in his grandfather's time. It was only last Saturday he brought the young Squire in to see it."

"Do you know it's a quarter of an hour slow?"

"Well, it isn't. That clock is the most wonderful time-keeper in the county. There isn't its like

anywhere. Every New Year's day we get the correct time from the post-office, and that clock is never more than a minute or so out either way. Sir Walter had forgotten to wind up his watch last Saturday, and he set it just before leaving by that clock. He knows all about it."

"I suppose he did not come all the way here simply to do that?"

"No. He came to see the new pigsties, and while he and dad were looking at them, the young gentleman had a bottle of ginger-beer and a cake in here."

"Just so. It's very good ginger-beer," said I, sipping it as she took my money and went out. A few minutes later we were once more on the road.

"You did not drink that ginger-beer, after all," said Charlie.

"You might be a detective," said I. "At my time of life I could not risk it. It agrees better with our friend, Dick Gerrans. By the by, what does that young man deserve for causing me so much trouble, and making me expend sixpence on a gaseous, explosive drink?"

"I don't know."

"A good whipping, I think, and he has, to my knowledge, had one already this week."

"Poor little beggar," said Charlie.

CHAPTER IX

3 P.M.—4.30 P.M.

"Now," said I, "you can show me the way to Grimes's farm."

"It is up that cart-road on the right. But, I say, are we really doing detective-work?"

"What do you think? Do you believe that a parsimonious Government pays me to wander round country roads and expend sixpences on ginger-beer merely for the fun of the thing?"

"What are you going to discover at Grimes's farm?"

"I don't know yet. We shall see. Do you know the name of the cowman?"

"Prosser, I think it is. Are we going there?"

"Well, I think that is his cottage, and as we reach it before the farm we will call."

The cottage, however, was locked up, but there were four quite pretty and rather dirty children locked out, and I asked them why they were not at school.

"Please, sir, the Inspector came this morning, and he give us a half-holiday."

"Do you know, I am an Inspector, too?"

Four pairs of eyes looked at me doubtfully. They edged away. The two elder girls dropped me old-fashioned curtsies. A toddler clung to one of their frocks. The boy retreated to the corner of the cottage.

"You need not be afraid of me," I said.

"I ain't afraid of nought," said the boy, and promptly disappeared out of sight.

"You haven't discovered much there," said Charlie.

"Only that they have a teacher who inspires them with some of his own terror of an inspector. Let's go on to the farm."

As we reached the door of the farm, who should come out but Cook with her sleeves tucked up, carrying a great tin bath, full of dirty water, which she emptied down a drain. She looked very red and determined.

"Hullo, Cook. What on earth are you doing here?" asked Charlie.

"And why shouldn't I be here, Master Charlie? That's what I want to know. Wasn't Mary Grimes my best friend, and she dead not three months ago? Isn't it about time somebody came and looked after her children?"

"Is Mr. Grimes in?" I asked.

"No, he isn't, and a good thing, too! If he'd been here, I couldn't have done what I have done, and put his house and children to rights. Poor man! I'm sorry for him, I am. And Mary, she would just turn in her grave if she could see the dust and dirt, and she'd fair have a fit if she'd seen the children as they were an hour ago. She so proud of her home as she was—real house-proud, and rightly so, too. To think of that Mrs. Prosser having the doing of it—and she out in the fields most of her time—and with children of her own to neglect. Wait till I see Walter Grimes. I'll let him know. The man's got no sense to let a tidy house get like that."

By this time we had entered the kitchen, and cook had turned down her sleeves and put on her hat.

"I say," said Charlie, "do tell us what you've been up to."

"I've changed all the sheets, and got out clean clothes. There are plenty of them in the cupboard upstairs. Mary was a careful woman, and had plenty of everything. I brought clean shirts downstairs to air them, and then I put the big kettle on the fire,

and I said to the children : ' I'm going to bath you.' They were surprised. They said : ' Not now, Aunt Alice, we've only just had dinner.' And I said : ' Now or never—I've got to get back, and I've *my* dinner to see to.' And Tom—that's the eldest—said : ' I always bathed myself when mother was alive.' ' And you haven't done it since,' said I. ' Now, none of your impudence. If you aren't stripped naked before I've got the bath ready, I'll lock you up in the coal-cellar till your father comes home. Then you will be black, and he'll have the washing of you.' I just rubbed the soap into that boy's eyes, I did. There's not much impudence left in him. As for his brother, he didn't give me any of his cheek. Last of all, I bathed the little maid. She's just five. Her hair looked as if it had not been brushed for a week, poor lamb—and Mary, she was that particular."

" And what have you done with them?" asked Charlie.

" Done with them?" asked cook. " What do you do with children after you've bathed them? I've put them to bed, of course. There are their clothes," she added, pointing to three little heaps on the dresser. " I wasn't going to have them mucking themselves up after I'd taken all that trouble. There they are, all nicely tucked up, as clean as new pins, and as sweet as can be. You'd like to see them, maybe?"

Cook lifted the latch of the door which concealed the staircase, opening direct into the kitchen. There was an immediate scurry of little feet, and when we reached the large bedroom under the eaves, there were two little boys, with their washed heads looking like wire-haired terriers, in a big bed; and a little girl with a mouth covered with jam, sitting up in a cot. A plate of cakes and jam tarts, brought by cook, was on a little table between the bed and the cot.

Cook immediately pounced on the little girl, wiped her mouth, gave her a kiss, and, drawing her out of her cot in her nightie, said : " There! Isn't she just a love? Poor, motherless mite."

Immediately both little boys, in very abbreviated shirts, were out of bed also. "Can we get up, too, Aunt Alice?"

"Disgraceful!" said Cook, and Charlie catching first one boy and then the other, placed first one in bed and then the other on the top of him, and a lively scuffle and some tickling ensued.

"Disgraceful!" said Cook again. "You give over, Master Charlie, you're worse than the children, that's what you are—tumbling all the clothes like that. Lie still, you little limbs, or I'll slap you. What will the gentleman, and he a policeman, think of you?"

This turned attention to myself, and the two boys were once more tucked up securely, but immediately sat up in bed and tried to look good.

"Now you be good children," said cook. "Your clothes are downstairs, and I shall lock the door into the kitchen and leave the key in the lock, so you'll have to stay where you are until your father comes home. I've got to get back to my work."

"Please, Aunt Alice," said the younger boy, "we shall be frightened if you lock us in and leave us alone."

"You've been left alone, I reckon, a good deal these last months."

"We aren't frightened," said the elder boy. "Leastways, we were only scared on Monday night when the lady at The Elms was shot. As soon as we heard of it, father started into town to hear all about it at the 'Rose and Crown'; and he was so long away, and the fire went out, and we felt creepy all over."

"And what did you do?" asked Charlie.

"We went down the lane to look for father, and he wasn't there. Then Mary began to cry, so Jim stayed with her, and I went on towards Aldersford. And just as I came to The Elms someone rushed out—I think it was a ghost—and threw two things over the palings, they looked as if they were done up in paper, and then rushed back again. I was fair

scared, I can tell you. I ran and didn't stop until we were all back in the kitchen. Oh, we were glad when father came home."

"Frightened folk," said cook, "see what ain't there. Who could it have been? Weren't we all in the kitchen? Well, if it was anyone, it was the man who is pretending that he isn't a policeman. It's just about all he's good for—to play the boggy to bairns. Now, don't you go frightening one another. There's plenty of cakes left. You eat them and you won't be afraid of nought."

Charlie here produced some coppers. He gave two to each of the boys, and then found he had only one for the little girl, so I contributed the second penny.

"The last coin I have in the world," said Charlie as we went out of the door.

"No matter," said I. "Your moneylender noted and approved your extravagance."

"I say, was there anything in what that kid said?"

"Yes," I replied, "it was most important. It just fitted in with something Cook told me the first time I saw her."

"Cook didn't see the connection?"

"Of course not. Cook isn't a detective."

"But you didn't go to the farm to find that out."

"No. I went to see Mr. Grimes, and must see him to-morrow. In my work one often goes after one piece of evidence and stumbles on another."

CHAPTER X

4.30 P.M.—6 P.M.

I THINK Charlie was the happier for his walk. It had taken him out of himself, and he looked more like a boy when we parted at The Elms gate. I walked to the police station and had tea with Mrs. Thomas, and told the little girls about the three children who had been bathed and put to bed so early in the afternoon. I then went and wrote out my report for the day, and a summary of the conclusions at which I had arrived. It was just as I had finished that the Super arrived.

"I say," I remarked, "you ought to have searched that plantation opposite The Elms on Monday afternoon."

"Who says I didn't search it?" asked the Super. "The local police aren't fools. We went through that plantation pretty thoroughly."

"But you didn't find those three envelopes."

"Had I done so, I shouldn't have marked them. You don't mean to tell me that they have any significance?"

"Well, just listen. Those three envelopes suggested to me that the broken paling was being used as a post-office. There was some correspondence going on between somebody at The Elms and somebody at the Manor. It was regular, because the way through the plantation was well trodden. Then Detective Smith finds out at Badenhurst that Mr. Brown at the Manor is courting Harriet Nokes at The Elms. Next, a small boy at Grimes's farm tells me this afternoon that he saw someone on Monday night throw two parcels over the palings.

That was while your plain-clothes man was just stepping round to the kitchen for a bit of food. Cook told me he did so. Later, Mr. Brown came to the accustomed place for Harriet's letter. He found those two parcels done up in Monday's *Times*. He undid them, and lo! there was Master Dick's rifle. When he returned to the Manor, he thought it wouldn't do to put back that rifle into the rack with his finger-marks on it, so he cleaned it carefully first. I think the bits are coming together and fitting in all right."

"Yes, but I don't see how you know the rifle was wrapped up in Monday's *Times*."

"Well, that's another story, and the evidence is not yet quite complete. Have you heard anything from the Dolminster police?"

"Yes, they have visited Manton's, the old curiosity shop, and found that Mrs. Ackroyd had been there before them. Manton's bought three pieces of old plate from a lady. It all had the Gerrans arms on it. Mrs. Ackroyd warned them to do nothing until she heard from her friend. You are no doubt right about Mrs. de Morville's 'discovery'."

"And what happens next?"

"The police hope to identify the lady and Mr. Brown this afternoon. I have warned them that you wish the arrest to be made here, and that you think that some light may be thrown on the de Morville murder."

"We must wait, anyhow, for Detective Smith's report. I will let you know the first thing to-morrow morning. It will not be prudent for me to have an interview with Detective Smith until after ten to-night, when the 'Rose and Crown' will be closed."

CHAPTER XI

6 P.M.—6.30 P.M.

ON returning to the "Rose and Crown" I met the landlady.

"There's that young keeper from the Manor upstairs waiting for you, sir. He has been here this half-hour, and won't go away. He was that fidgety—asking every two minutes when you would be in—that I took him upstairs and told him to wait."

"Very good. It is very pleasant to hear of people so anxious to see a detective. I suppose that young man in No. 15 has not had another bilious attack? I should be sorry if the keeper you speak of made too much noise."

"He's out. He's gone to Dolminster to see the cathedral. He's mad on old churches. It don't seem natural in a nice honest boy like him. My son wouldn't have crossed the road to see a cathedral. It was hard enough to get him to church on a Sunday."

"Well, he probably won't have a church to go to in Canada."

"How did you know he was in Canada?"

"I guessed it when I saw that pamphlet about sunny Alberta in the coffee-room."

The landlady was impressed at my power of induction, and I was just a little put out, for I had nearly given away my connection with Billy Smith.

On opening the door, a young man who was apparently doing a quarter-deck walk in my apartment turned and faced me.

"Oh, you've come, have you? Now I want to know why I am being followed about by policemen. I almost broke that chap's head this afternoon—and he said it was by your orders."

"You are, I expect, Frederick Milward?"

"Yes, that's my name, and you know it fast enough. You'll know more about me soon, if you don't explain."

"No, my good young man, you will generally find when you are unhappy enough to meet a detective that it is he who wants explanations; and if they aren't satisfactory, the consequences are unpleasant."

"What should I have to explain?"

"First of all, what were you doing hiding in The Elms shrubbery?"

"How do you know I was there?"

"If you look at your gaiters, you will find that there is a button off on your left leg. Where is that button? It is in my waistcoat pocket. Where did I find it? In just the place from which Mrs. de Morville might have been shot."

Fred Milward was surprised. He was at once on the defensive, and declared:

"I wasn't in that shrubbery on Monday afternoon. I couldn't have been. I can prove it."

"That's lucky for you. Then there was that little scene in The Elms kitchen on Saturday. I suppose I have heard the truth about it?"

"I don't know what you've heard. There are lots of lies going about. But I'll tell you straight, my young lady is a good girl, and there's nothing she need be ashamed of. So there!"

"Quite so, but unfortunately Mrs. de Morville did not, I understand, approve of your presence in her kitchen, and I don't think you were in the best of tempers when you went out."

"Would you have been in a good temper if anyone had spoken to you as that old woman spoke to me? I ask you that."

"I don't know about that—but as things have

turned out it is a pity that on Sunday you spoke about Mrs. de Mcrville in a way which made people think that you wanted to—well, to get a bit of your own back.”

“Who says I spoke like that?”

“Well, Elsie Evans says you didn’t. But she’s a truthful girl, and she doesn’t lie in a successful manner.”

“I will ask you to speak respectfully of Miss Evans.”

“I have the utmost respect for her. I thought her one of the nicest girls I have met, and I should be sorry if she took up with a young fellow who wasn’t worthy of her.”

“Have you been crabbing me to her?”

“No, I was very sorry for her—very sorry, indeed, poor child. You see, I’m a father, and have girls of my own; and I should be sorry if one of my girls got mixed up with a man who had got himself into trouble.”

“I’m not in trouble. I can prove exactly where I was on Monday afternoon.”

“I’m glad to hear it. So, you see, you can tell me all about it.”

Fred Milward by this time was very anxious to do so, and I am bound to say that his account of his movements on Monday afternoon was lucid and exact. It tallied, moreover, with the report which I had received from Superintendent Thomas. I made it quite evident that I accepted his explanations. But when he had finished, I said:

“And now you have to tell me when you were in that shrubbery. It is most important that I should know if I am to detect the murderer. If I don’t, there will always be nasty people who will be whispering remarks about you and Elsie.”

“I went down to The Elms on the chance of seeing Elsie on Sunday night.”

“Why were you not in your Sunday clothes?”

"I only get off every other Sunday—and not always then, when poachers are about. Now that October is near we have to be very careful about the birds."

"You saw Elsie?"

"Yes, in the back drive."

"And like a silly boy you said a good many hard things about Mrs. de Morville."

Fred blushed, and then said: "I didn't mean them. At least, I did mean them in a way—I was angry for Elsie being sacked. But I wouldn't have laid a finger on Mrs. de Morville, or, for the matter of that, on any woman."

"And then?"

"Well, just as I came out of the drive, I heard the iron gate of The Elms clang, and as I did not wish to get Elsie into any more trouble, I stepped into the shrubbery."

"Who came in?"

"It was too dark to see his face, but it was Sir Walter Gerrans. I saw the gleam of his white shirt-front. He was smoking a cigar. I went farther into the shrubbery, where I could see the front door. He went in, and I waited for the door to close before I crept out. As I did so, I ran right into another man. It was Mr. Brown, and he was smoking a cigar."

"Just like Sir Walter. Like master, like man, eh?"

"Mr. Brown said in his nasty, sarcastic way: 'After the girls?' and I said: 'Are you?' He said: 'None of your impudence, young fellow!' I was a bit rattled, and answered him pretty sharply. Then I went away."

"And Mr. Brown?"

"I left him standing in the middle of the drive. I went home."

"Well, that's all right. You won't be bothered any more by the police—but who am I? I can't stop slanderous tongues. I am very sorry for Elsie, and the way people are talking."

"What can I do?"

"If I were you, I should go straight round to the parson and put the banns up."

"By George! I'll do it."

"Then good night, and I hope you will be very happy."

CHAPTER XII

8.45 P.M.—10 P.M.

I DINED in the coffee-room with a voluble commercial traveller who discussed trade, about which he knew something, the crops, about which he knew nothing, the Bishop of Dolminster and the de Morville murder, about which he knew all that the *Daily Intelligence* had to tell him. He knew who I was, and, I have no doubt, will be laying down the law next week about the de Morville murder on the strength of having dined with Inspector Frost, and discussed the mystery with him.

After dinner I retired to my room to write up my narrative, and at eight-forty-five I went down into the bar-parlour to hear what the town worthies had to say.

In the corner was Mr. Davies and Mr. Denton, both of them evidently habitués. There was also a man, who I learnt was the principal grocer, Barnard by name, the commercial, and my own Billy with a look of sweet innocence on his face. I sat down beside him, and opened conversation by remarking:

"I hope you are better to-day. I was sorry to hear you were so unwell last night. Our landlady seemed to think that you had been over-exerting yourself."

"And I think you kindly suggested that it was pickles," said Billy, with a smile.

"Only my joke. I suppose you have been taking it easy to-day—not riding your motor-bike?"

"No. I have been to Dolminster by train. Such a glorious cathedral. The finest church in Early English in the world. Would you like to see my

post cards? Now observe the wonderful span of that vault."

"I thought a vault was a place to bury people in?" said I.

"Vaults sometimes contain good liquor," said Mr. Barnard.

"I always say that there is nothing in the world to touch our English cathedrals," said the commercial, who had probably never crossed the Channel.

"You should show those excellent photos to Mr. —I am sorry, I did not catch his name. He is evidently, like you, an enthusiast," said I.

Billy did not wink, but he crossed over to the commercial traveller and bored him almost to extinction with his post cards.

"Well, Mr. Inspector," said Mr. Denton, "I expect you have had a very busy day?"

"Very," said I. "I have had some important and some unimportant interviews. I have had one with our friend Mr. Davies there."

"I did not find my suggestions very well received," said Mr. Davies.

"You see," said I, "that I had already made exhaustive researches into the case of *Gerrans v. Gerrans* in 1810. I am glad to tell you, Mr. Denton, that your version was correct. Mr. Davies, I am sure, will agree with us when he can find time to read up the case. Sir Walter has nothing to fear from any discovery."

"I didn't say he had," said Mr. Davies.

"My mistake, of course, but I did understand you to imply that the discovery mentioned in Mrs. de Morville's letter had something to do with the missing certificate."

"Tell you what it is, Mr. Davies," said Mr. Barnard, the grocer, "you should never mix up these things with politics. That's the worst of politicians. Now I always say, politics is politics, business is business, and my neighbours—well, they are just my neighbours. When an election comes along I record

my vote. Why shouldn't I? But I don't tell everyone how I voted. It's not right to do so, or why have a ballot-box? You've got your knife into Sir Walter, and you know you don't know him—a good gentleman, who deals locally and pays his bills. It's just politics with you all the time.”

Mr. Davies was about to reply, but I intervened.

“I hear, sir, that I have to congratulate you on having a son who is a promising young cricketer. I hope some day to see that he is playing for his county.”

“Yes, sir, I am told that he can hold his own with any lad of his age, even those who have had advantages which I cannot afford to give him.”

“Made the top score, I am told, in a recent boys' match.”

Mr. Davies looked at me suspiciously. He looked at his neighbours, who knew the facts, and had to say: “In the first innings.”

“I say, Inspector,” said Mr. Denton, “have you sent off those hairpins? You did amuse my young ladies by buying them yesterday.”

“I am keeping them to take home with me. Don't you go telling everyone about my little domestic secrets—though I should like to know if those copper-coloured things are a special line of your own.”

“I expect they are. I bought them from a traveller who doesn't generally come this way. I don't remember ever seeing any like them before.”

“I'll tell my daughter. She will almost wish she had a couple of plaits instead of an Eton crop.”

“That's what we chiefly hear about you, Inspector,” said Mr. Davies, “talking with girls about hairpins, when all Aldersford wants you to find the murderer.”

“It's bad for the mind never to unbend,” said I.

“Mr. Davies wants a criminal to defend,” said the grocer.

"Oh," said I. "I think I may promise him that by Saturday."

"What, the murderer?" said Mr. Davies eagerly.

"No, I don't think you will defend the murderer."

"I am told," said Mr. Denton, turning on Billy, "that you also are engaged in the law."

"Oh, I am only an articulated clerk, and my firm does not go in for criminal practice."

"Too high-class," said Mr. Davies, with a sneer.

"Much too high," said Billy with provoking serenity.

At this, Mr. Barnard rose to go, and Mr. Davies followed him.

"Who's the youngster in the corner?" asked the grocer.

Mr. Davies looked over his shoulder at Billy and replied:

"A debt-collector's office-boy, I should think."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than Billy was upon him, and had twisted him round to face the company.

"Now, sir, you've to apologize."

"Listeners never hear any good of themselves."

"No, they generally hear lies, and mean ones at that."

Mr. Davies flushed.

"Do you know you have assaulted me?"

"Yes, but it's nothing to what I shall do, if you don't retract your words."

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" exclaimed the landlady, coming in. "This is a respectable house, and I cannot allow any disturbance."

"That man has insulted me," said Billy. "I appeal to the gentlemen who heard him."

"I am quite ready to bear witness to the insult," said I. "In a respectable house one does expect the guests to behave as gentlemen."

"Oh, come, Mr. Inspector," said Mr. Denton,

"I am sure Mr. Davies did not mean what he said. I am sure he will withdraw it."

"All right, if Mr. Denton thinks I ought, I will to oblige him," said Mr. Davies. He went out quickly, as if for fear that Billy would hasten his departure with his boot.

CHAPTER XIII

10.15 P.M.—11 P.M.

ONCE secluded in my own room I opened the door which communicated with Billy, and addressed him.

"Detective Smith, I'm ashamed of you. Does not a benevolent Government employ you and pay your expenses in a high-class family and commercial hotel in order that you may maintain the peace, and there was a moment when I really was afraid that you would punch the head of that highly respectable attorney."

"But, sir, you took my part downstairs."

"I spoke the truth when you appealed to me. My conscience, which is very sensitive on all questions of honour, impelled me to do so, but what a mess we should have been in if that legally-minded gentleman had had you up before the next petty sessions."

"Oh, I saw the blighter had no guts. He won't come here again for a bit."

"And that motherly party downstairs will lose the benefit of his custom."

"I don't know. I should think the bar-parlour will be a more popular place in the town if he is not there."

"After mature consideration I shall not report this incident to the Chief, who might take a view of its gravity prejudicial to your advancement. And, I say, Billy, how did you resist the temptation to toe him out of the door?"

"Ah, that was because of my professional training, which I owe largely to you, sir."

"You impudent youngster! Now tell me what you have done this afternoon."

"I arrived at Aldersford Junction at one o'clock—a most inconvenient hour. How can a man who has made a first-rate breakfast really do justice to lunch a little after twelve?—and, mind you, the British Government has to pay for that lunch whether I eat it or not. Still, there I was; and I took a cheap return ticket to Dolminster, and had my guide-book and the work on Early English architecture under my arm, which contained, strangely enough, some remarks about one Brown. Having glanced at those remarks, which suggested scandals, I tore them up and scattered minute pieces all down the platform. I was still at the book-stall when the train came in, and it was only at the last moment that Mr. Brown, looking very like a gentleman in Sir Walter's cast-off clothes, came perspiring on to the platform, carrying a big black bag. He scrambled into a third-class carriage, and I jumped in on top of him. Of course, we both apologized, and both congratulated one another on catching the train like that, and I insisted on helping him to put the very heavy bag into the rack."

"Now, Billy, aren't you getting a bit wordy?"

"Details, sir, make an adventure real. Don't forget the bag was heavy. No wonder the poor man was nearly late. He's not, you know, a very hefty person."

"Do get on."

"Mr. Brown and I sat down opposite one another, and I told him how the ambition of my youth was to be fulfilled, and I was going to see the glorious cathedral of Dolminster, the most perfect example of Early English architecture in the world. I even offered to read him some extracts out of the book, and he was quite nice about it. He did not refer me to the deaf old farmer in the other corner, as I fear you would have done. No, he even told me that evensong was at four, that the choir was famous, and

that ever so many people came to Dolminster on Thursdays just to hear the anthem. Of course, that led me to ask if he might be there, and whether we could go together; but, will you believe me, he excused himself. He said he had one or two commissions for Sir Walter—he glanced at the black bag—and one or two little business matters of his own to attend to. When we arrived at Dolminster, I insisted on helping him with that black bag. I even contrived to let it drop on to the platform as I passed it out to him, just to hear how it sounded. I rather thought there was a metallic noise, but I won't swear to it."

"Was Mr. Brown still amiable?"

"On the whole, yes; but I had the tact to see that he did not wish for my company any further, so I let him trudge in front of me the whole length of the station, and then ran after him to ask him the way to the cathedral, just as he was about to greet a lovely lady. Oh, no, I was not so rude as to interfere when I saw the lady—some style about her—our friend Brown is a man of taste. I just turned smartly to the right and recognized the plain-clothes man with the red tie whom you had arranged for, and gave him the straight tip. He followed the pair, and he had a friend with him who started off for Manton's to find someone who could identify the lady, and I went to the Police Station. The Super there was a jolly old bird, as keen as mustard, and mighty pleasant when he knew that Scotland Yard would leave all the kudos to him and Thomas."

"Billy," I said, "I am grieved to think you did not see the cathedral."

"You are wrong there. I had two and a half hours to spare and nothing to do, so, of course, I went to the cathedral. You know, sir, it is a tophole place—lifts you up, somehow, and makes you feel good, and the music was ripping. I should know, I was a choir-boy once—but, lor'! we didn't pipe it out like those kids."

"I am glad that you can recognize excellencies to

which you have not attained. It is a becoming trait in the young."

"After that I had tea in a most refined tea-shop, served by young ladies in white blouses with blue overalls, who didn't take tips. Table-cloth, china, cake—all quite classy. So was the price—two-and-six. Do you think the British Government will run to that?"

"Yes, if you put it down as extras."

"Then I strolled back to the station. Plain-clothes man was loafing about waiting for me. The lady's all right. She has been living for three weeks in a boarding-house, goes to the cathedral most days, and talks about her dear husband and how they have lost all their money. It is she who sold those three bits of plate to Manton. Showed them to her fellow-boarders, and said they were the last of the family heirlooms. The affectionate husband has visited her every week. He's known in the house as the man with the black bag. She is known as Mrs. Blount."

"She was Sharpe last time."

"She will be a 'Flat' to-morrow. To go on: Nearly ten minutes before the train started, Mr. and Mrs. Sharpe, Blount, or Brown, sauntered on to the platform like a pair of elderly turtle-doves, and he entered an empty carriage and leant out of the window for the parting endearments. I put on my mack, and turned down the brim of my hat, and entered another compartment. It was a corridor-train, and, as luck would have it, the corridor was on the off side. So I moved along until I came to Brown's compartment. The door into the corridor was open, so I stood with my back to them and listened. There wasn't much to look at out of the window.

"'I shall have fixed up the master by half-past five,' said Brown.

"'And I shall be waiting for you at the end of the drive,' said Mrs. B.

"'You'll do it easily,' said Brown.

" 'Rather,' said Mrs. B. 'I shall just pop in and out with a nice little hamper.'

"It was then that a silly fool came down the corridor, and I had to step back into the carriage. Brown turned round and recognized me.

" 'We seem fated to travel together,' said I.

" 'Yes,' said he, and I was not quite certain that he was not suspicious. Mrs. Blount, seeing that he had a friend, waved good-bye, and left, saying with girlish gaiety: 'Till to-morrow,' and I sat down opposite Mr. Brown, saying: 'I hope my coming in did not interrupt you.'

" 'Oh, no,' said Brown. 'That's my sister. She's married to a baker in Dolminster. He's pretty well-to-do, and has a Morris-Cowley of his own for jaunts on Sunday. My sister was just offering to run over to Aldersford and take me for a spin. Sir Walter is dining out to-morrow night. I shall be free after half-past five.'

"Now wasn't that a complete explanation, thought of on the spur of the moment? Ought to have convinced you, leave out me. I must say friend Brown is a ready liar.

"Of course, I was not particularly interested; I was much too full of the cathedral and the anthem. Friend Brown heard all about them. He must think me dotty on art. I pointed out to him that I only had short holidays, and liked to see all I could. He was quite sympathetic. That somehow led me to say how much I should like to see the Manor, and how unfortunate it was that I should be leaving Aldersford to-morrow afternoon, so I was afraid he could not show it me. We had become quite pally by that time, and he said: 'The funeral is to-morrow at twelve. Sir Walter will probably start for it at about half-past eleven. If you came up to the side door about that time I could probably show you round. There's a wonderful collection of heads in the hall.' I was grateful.

"At the station I helped him down with a very light black bag, and only left him when I turned into

the 'Rose and Crown'. It's been pretty simple, and rather a lark!"

"Billy, you shall have full marks. The Chief shall not fail to hear of your merits. And then to think you risked it all by wishing to pull Mr. Davies's nose."

"About which, sir, I think you said the Chief would hear nothing."

"Weak partiality on my part, I fear, Billy. We all have blind spots, but I did see when he turned round exactly where you—no, I mean somebody else—ought to have kicked him. But Mr. Davies may be blotted out. Serious business is with Mr. Brown. Wait a minute. How does this strike you? Mr. Brown for the last three weeks has been conveying the more valuable plate, which is rarely used, and perhaps Lady Gerran's jewels, in the black bag to Dolminster."

"That's my idea."

"I imagine that they have an American customer who will buy the lot and ask no questions. Directly the robbery is known the plate will be unsaleable in England. No 'fence' would give more than its value in metal."

"Why did they sell those three pieces to Manton's?"

"To raise a little of the ready in order to get away. It was a mistake, of course, but criminals generally do make mistakes. If they didn't, we detectives would go out of business."

"Now we come to the hamper. It is not impossible that Mrs. Blount may motor out to Aldersford to-morrow afternoon, and make a scoop of The Elms plate, just to score off her hated rival Harriet. It will as a side-show be a pleasant interlude, while waiting for her hubby to fix Sir Walter."

"What does 'fixing' Sir Walter mean? I don't suppose Brown intends murder. In a place like Aldersford murders can be overdone. Now, I shouldn't be surprised if Mr. Brown is intending

something in the way of blackmail. He knows something we don't about the de Morville murder, and he may think there is money in it. He may even think that it will save him from prosecution when his thefts are discovered. How does that strike your fresh young mind?"

"It's just it," said Billy, "and I shall be there to applaud."

"No, you won't, Billy. I'm sorry. You will leave early to-morrow afternoon. It would not do for us to depart together. It would give the whole show away."

"I should like to be in at the death," grumbled Billy.

"I don't know about the death," said I. "You see, the de Morville case has boiled down to this: Only two people can have done it; and there is only real evidence against one. In fact, I am convinced about the murderer, but I am too old a bird to commit myself until the other is ruled out. What I have not discovered is any conceivable motive. Mrs. de Morville's diary may or may not supply it. Anyhow, I go to Town on Saturday morning. If I have found a motive I shall first make an arrest. If I have not, I must discuss matters with the Chief. He might think the evidence not good enough for a jury, especially after some Sir James Levi, K.C., has confused their minds."

"And what have I to do at the Manor to-morrow?"

"Keep your eyes open. And, Billy, if you can get into that library, you will notice that there is a heavy curtain before one of the french-windows which looks out on the side of the house. It will be a convenience if that was unlatched, but I don't know how you will manage it."

"Trust me," said Billy.

PART FOUR

Friday, September 25th, 1924

CHAPTER I

6.30 A.M.—9.30 A.M.

It is unnecessary at this point to write out the notes which I made early in the morning. I visited the Super and made arrangements with him, breakfasted as usual at half-past seven, and shortly after eight started for Grimes's farm. I reckoned that he would be indoors for the children's breakfast and to see them off to school. I had, indeed, to loiter some time in the cart lane until the children of Grimes and his cowman, Prosser, came straggling past me. The boys touched their caps, the girls curtsied, and all of them grinned. Yesterday had not been forgotten.

Then I pushed on to the farmhouse and met Grimes with a pipe in his mouth at the kitchen-door: a stalwart, florid man with sandy side-whiskers and an air of universal good-nature. He had heard about my previous visit, and was quite ready to ask me in. He was somewhat perplexed as to why I wanted to see him, and assured me at once he knew nought about the murder of the poor lady, and would have spoken long since if he had anything to say.

"No, Mr. Grimes, of course you know nothing about the murder; but, in discovering who did it, I want to know who could have been in the road. I have seen Colonel Sandon, who was walking to Aldersford. He met Sir Walter Gerrans. I have seen Sir Walter, and he tells me that he met you. I am quite sure that you won't mind answering the same sort of questions as the other gentlemen."

"I don't see why I shouldn't," said Mr. Grimes cautiously.

"Now, where were you coming from?"

"From home, surely—where else should I be coming from? I was just going into Aldersford for an ounce of baccy."

"And where did you meet Sir Walter?"

"I saw Sir Walter coming out of the Manor back-way, and we must have met some little way past the gate into my field. He was walking towards Coldmorton."

"Can you tell me the exact time?"

"It was a quarter-past four, or maybe a bit more, just a minute or so, for I expected to meet my brats on the road from school, but Tom was kept back by the teacher—he's a handful, is Tom—and the other two waited for him."

"Did you meet anyone on the way to Aldersford?"

"Not as I can call to mind. Yes, I met Mrs. Prosser and her little lot, and stopped to ask them about mine. That's how I heard Tom had been a bad boy. The Prosser kids told of him. It ain't likely he'd have told me himself."

"There's a tobacconist just before you come to the 'Rose and Crown'."

"That's right. I bought the baccy there and came straight out. Walked out with Prosser, my cowman. You can ask him."

"Did you meet anyone coming the other way?"

"Not a soul. Half-way home, that Super passed me in that little contraption of his. He was driving like the devil. He ought to have taken himself up, he ought, and been locked up in his own Station."

"You forget, he was after a murderer."

"I haven't heard that he caught him. I guess you are after the murderer, too, but you came walking up here as sober as a judge. Maybe some day you'll have better luck."

"Well, Mr. Grimes, I've proved that the murderer did not go to Coldmorton, did not go to Aldersford, did not go up the back-way towards the Manor stables, and did not hide in the shrubbery at The Elms or in the plantation opposite."

"Maybe he went down my field where trespassers will be prosecuted. That's the sort of notice which might tempt an audacious villain like a murderer."

"No, Mr. Grimes, I have discovered that Master Dick Gerrans was coming up by the holly hedge just when the shot was fired."

"The devil he was! And didn't his father promise me he shouldn't never do it again?"

"Small boys don't always do what their fathers tell them."

"Then they should have a good hiding. That's what I say."

"Master Dick had that. I saw him bathing in the river yesterday. He was black and blue all right. Not little marks, Mr. Grimes, but good broad weals."

"You don't say so. I'm sorry. I wouldn't have got the little lad into trouble if I'd known that his father would treat him that cruel. I've always said he's a tidy little boy. He's not stuck-up, either. Why, it's only last Easter he was out birds'-nesting with my Tom, and Tom came home having torn the seat of his breeches; and Master Dick came, too—as bold as brass—to say it was all his fault, as he had made him try to get over that wire fencing I'd just put up so carefully to prevent folk getting over—the young varminths! They both ought to have had a hiding then, but somehow they didn't. My wife was alive then. She was a bit soft with children. She gave 'em both a bit of cake. Sir Walter oughtn't to have done it. Why, if it comes to that, the lady ought to have had a good walloping, too."

"What lady?"

"Why, that Miss Courtland, to be sure. You see, it was this way. That gardener chap at The Elms, who pretends he is a shover, came and told me that Master Dick was shooting rabbits in my field. I don't mind owning I was ratty at the time, and down I went to catch him, but, lor' bless you, I was much too late. That Stevens chap hadn't found me all at once. But would you believe it, whom should I find walking up that path as cool as a cucumber but that

Miss Courtland. I was a bit hot myself. I'd been running, you see, and I wasn't maybe in the best of tempers, so I said: 'What are you doing trespassing in my field, ma'am? You don't find me walking about on your lawn.' 'I didn't think you would mind, Mr. Grimes,' says she as pleasant as possible. 'Well I do,' said I. 'It's this way. Didn't I have to buy my farm from Mr. Badeley after the War, and don't I owe a lot to the Bank for it, still? It's the principle I stand for, ma'am—the rights of property. An Englishman likes his rights.' 'Very well, Mr. Grimes,' says she as pleasant as possible, 'then I'll go back and all the way round by the Town Meadows, and I'll promise not to trespass again.' Well, sir, you see how it was, she made me feel fair ashamed of myself, and I had to say I didn't mean it; and all she said was: 'Thank you, Mr. Grimes. You are kind.' So on she went as cool as a cucumber—never turned a hair, she did. She was carrying something under her cloak. Dashed if I didn't think first it was a gun of some sorts, but, of course, it couldn't be. I 'spects it was one of those sticks that open out to sit on. Some old gents go shooting with them. Perhaps it was summat else. How should I know?"

"I expect Master Charles Steel in the old days was a terrible trespasser in your field?"

"It wasn't mine then. Leastways, I was only a tenant farmer. I've nought against him. He was up here only yesterday like yourself, sir. The children weren't half-full of all their goings on when I came home last night."

"Yes, we found Miss Goodman, the cook at The Elms, very much in command."

"Why shouldn't she be? You see, sir, I'm going to marry her."

"Are you? I congratulate you, and I congratulate her."

"Now, don't you go and do that. She doesn't know. I haven't asked her yet."

"What if she won't have you?"

"Oh, she'll have me all right! You see, I come from Badenhams same as she does. I've known her all my life. Why, when I was a big lad and she a wee toddler, haven't I carried her home from school on my back many a time? She was my first wife's best friend, she was—a good friend, too—and Mary would like it, I felt she would."

"But what will Miss Goodman like?"

"Well, sir, you see, it's like this. Alice she was fair gone on Tom Bevan, he as was killed in the War. That's why she's never married. You only loves once like that. I know that all right. But Alice, she's got sense. Her missis is dead. She don't want to start in service all over again. She likes me, and I can offer her a tidy home. She likes the children, and they are that fond of Aunt Alice. They'll always call her that. Somehow, I shouldn't like them to call her mother. We shall be very happy together. I count on that. She'll have me all right, no fear!"

CHAPTER II

12 A.M.—1 P.M.

THE gaps in the history of the rifle were filling up, but I was still as far as ever from discovering a motive for the crime. Everything pointed to Mrs. de Morville being shot by the most unlikely and altogether unsuspected person. A jury, I felt, would require overwhelming evidence before bringing in a verdict of guilty.

I went back to the "Rose and Crown" and changed my farmer-like habiliments for clothes more proper for a funeral—clothes that my wife and daughters would only have criticized on the score of their being old-fashioned. I reached the lich-gate of the churchyard some twenty minutes before twelve, and, as I expected, no one at Aldersford was so busy that they could not attend, except the children, who were kept in school by teachers who wanted themselves to be there. The Super was in his best uniform, seeing that the path to the church door was kept clear. I stood beside him, and he pointed out the notabilities as they arrived. The strange thing to an observer was that they all got out of their cars and walked straight to the church, without looking to right or left, though all of them were acquainted. First came Mr. Badeley, of Badensham, of whom the Super said: "Of the oldest family in Blankshire, older even than the Gerranses, much older than Lord Treholm's family; as poor as can be. Bless you, all the grand rooms at Badensham are shut up, but he won't sell his land. Well, he did have to part with three or four outlying farms after the War. That's his cousin, the Coroner, just following him.

He's lawyer to all the big folk hereabouts. He's a rich man, and much more comfortable than his cousin. Here comes the Treholm motor. They've both come. She's a peeress in her own right, and wants a seat in the House of Lords. When that comes up, Lord Treholm has to go and vote. His man told me there was a fearful row last time, for it interfered with a race meeting. That man's chairman of the Quarter Sessions. He's a Squire. Yes, but he's made a deal of money in London. He's a K.C. The police like him. He knows his job. That's the Dean getting out now with the tall lady in black. Oh, he has a black suit-case with him. So he's going to take the service. That's the Vicar. His wife, poor thing, won't come, you'll see. With her babies, she misses everything. That man who has run after the Dean is the Vicar of Coldmorton—he used to be in Dolminster before he came here. There's Mr. Fulton, you know him; and Mr. Davies. It's strange his coming. He and Mrs. de Morville have been fighting for years. Oh, he's telling that reporter chap that he represents the District Council. Here's Sir Walter and his son." Sir Walter walked past, looking straight before him. Dick, in a silk hat and Eton suit, gave me a glance. He looked self-conscious, and even he was trying to play the part of a mourner.

The funeral was punctual, Mr. Denton walking ahead of it in clothes and gloves which were an advertisement to his shop, and with a gravity of demeanour which was befitting. Only two mourners besides the servants followed the coffin, Mr. Treherne and Charlie Steel. Miss Courtland, as the Super prophesied, was unable to bear the strain, and Elsie alone wept throughout the ceremony.

As the Dean stood at the foot of the grave and read "In the midst of life we are in death", the words came home with a new appropriateness, and I wondered about the God "Who for our sins art justly displeased", when I thought of the consequences of murder. The feelings of detectives are usually in

abeyance. They don't think of the horrors, they concentrate only on the difficulties of the investigation. It is just for a moment at a graveside that the human and emotional reality of a crime comes home to us. I, Inspector Frost, am, after all, not merely the skilled proficient in fitting together jigsaw puzzles, but a man who can sympathize.

The wreaths and flowers were very beautiful, but I stayed only a few minutes. I was surprised at the number of posies and home-made crosses with crudely-written bits of paper attached to them. After all, if Mrs. de Morville was not exactly a popular character, her work had not been done in vain, and there were many who recognized at the end her worth and goodness. There was a beautiful cross from Charlie Steel, with the words "In gratitude". I could not help wondering if cook had advanced the money for it. Miss Courtland's imposing wreath carried the legend: "From a desolate sister." Even at such a moment, she could not get away from herself.

CHAPTER III

I P.M.—2 P.M.

FROM the decent solemnities of the funeral I returned with the Super to the "Rose and Crown". I had asked him to lunch with me, for I owed him some entertainment, and, besides, I wanted to be quite clear about what was likely to happen in the afternoon. At the table on the other side of the room sat Billy Smith with a smile of satisfaction upon his face. Nobody has a right to look so pleased with himself as Billy did at that moment. I thought of the motherly party in the background, who was so sorry that he was going.

After lunch I took the Super to my room. We each had one of my cigars—they are better than those dispensed at the "Rose and Crown" for a shilling apiece. We had also a little tot of what the landlady profanely calls old liqueur brandy. I am sure the cherry brandy with which she doses Billy is of higher quality. Meantime, Billy was in his room, and very anxious to appear. He let us know he was there by dropping all the luggage which went on his motor-bike, and then by throwing his boots about.

"Detective Smith in there?" asked the Super, nodding towards the door.

"Yes," said I. "He will make a smart detective when he has learnt patience."

"Bright boy, I should say, from what you have told me."

"It is just the bright boys who have to be kept in their place."

"Well, I've never found it difficult to manage my

men, but those two girls of mine, blest if they aren't beyond me."

"I have had three! I gave it up long ago. No matter, it's good to have them. I always say to the wife: they will look after us in our second childhood."

"Thirty years hence," said the Super. "Now I must say so-long."

"So-long," said I. "We shall probably meet again if we both live to be eighty."

"I think we shall meet again at half-past five this afternoon."

The Super had not been gone more than two minutes, when I undid the bolts of the door between myself and Billy, and he entered.

"Billy," I said, "I have once more to complain of noise. The Super, a disciplinarian who can control everyone but a daughter aged six, was strongly of the opinion that no effective secrecy could be maintained by the police if they were allowed to drop Government boots about with such a clatter."

"I should have liked to have had a talk with him," said Billy.

"No doubt," said I, "but it is not befitting that a subordinate should be present at the anxious deliberations of his superior officers."

"I bet, sir, that one subordinate had better tipple downstairs than you and your Super had in those glasses."

"Billy, I'm ashamed of you—and remember this afternoon you continue your holiday jaunt just as far as Coldmorton, and then change your mind and return to London. Before we part, I am ready to receive any parting messages for the motherly old party downstairs."

"And," said Billy, "in remembrance of our happy associations I hope you will accept this souvenir."

With that, he handed me the outside sheet of Monday's *Times*, on which the newsagent had scribbled "Sir Walter Gerrans, Bt."

"How did you get it?"

"Rather neatly, I think. You see, I turned up at the side door of the Manor ten minutes before my time, and Sir Walter had not started for the funeral. So I had to sit in Brown's rooms and exercise that patience which befits a detective. There was some difficulty in the front of the house about getting under way. Sir Walter Gerrans, Bt., would not set sail until the topper of Richard Gerrans, Esquire, had been ironed. Brown himself was quite perturbed when he saw its condition. Why do toffs make their little boys wear such things? If I had had a topper as a kid, I should have played football with it."

"No, Billy, you wouldn't. If you had been privileged to be a boarder at a high-class preparatory school, you would have played football with the topper of a little friend."

"You're right," said Billy. "I hadn't thought of that. But to return to our muttons, as they say in France. While the hat was being ironed, I was sitting in a Windsor chair by the fireplace, contemplating paper which had been recently burnt in the grate. When Brown retired to crown Master Richard with that glossy hat, I was discovering from an unconsumed fragment that it belonged to *The Times* newspaper. In a cupboard close at hand I discovered wrappings and string, and found that Brown was preserving *The Times* newspaper of Monday after it had been used for covering two parcels. I wondered why. Just near the sink I found the outer sheet of Monday's *Times*, with Sir Walter's name on it, but Brown's step was so distinct that I was only just back in the Windsor chair when he appeared."

"How, then, did you get it?"

"Rather neatly, I think. I followed Brown down the passage, and just when we came to the end, I exclaimed: 'Sorry, I've forgotten my stick,' and I sprinted back down the passage for it. I had secured the stick and the paper before anyone so dignified as a butler could catch me up.

"The house was rather jolly. I say, that old chap,

what's his name, Nimrod, couldn't have been in it with Sir Walter. Of course, he didn't have his advantages. Transport, I imagine, had its limitations when Nineveh was boosted as the Chicago of its time. It was Nineveh, wasn't it? Or was it Babylon? I was word-perfect in Genesis when I went to a Sunday-school."

"Let us return to our muttons," said I. "I left Sunday-school before you were born."

"I know it's the library that's interesting you, just like me. I remembered in the nick of time about David Copperfield, and your wise observation that an articulated clerk might be literary. The state-rooms were mostly shut up. Sir Walter dines in a small room on the right. The hall and library are what they live in.

"Old Brown isn't a bad showman, and I can be a bit chatty, as you know. We didn't half get on well together. He didn't mind a bit when I pulled aside that curtain and said: 'What a pity to block up that window, and what a view of the garden.' I opened the window and stepped out on the terrace just for a minute to look about me, and then came back and made quite a to-do fastening that window and talking all the time. You'll find it is not secure; but, when you push, it will make a little noise in opening, so you had better get in when no one is near. Having settled the window, we drew the curtains. Old Brown hadn't a suspicion. All conjuring tricks are successful if you only know enough patter to keep the other chap attentive."

"I didn't know that conjuring was among your accomplishments."

"Oh, yes, I took up conjuring when I was a scout, about fourteen. It used to amuse the others in camp. They all said they saw how it was done, every time—only when it came to the point they couldn't do it. I remember having the Scoutmaster on, proper. I got him to assist, and produced out of his inner pocket a coloured photo of an actress with a toothy smile and the words, *Your best girl* written on it. It

was cheek, wasn't it? He chased me all round the camp before he caught me. Then he brought me by the scruff of the neck to the fire, and said that there would have to be a court of honour because of my impertinence to my superior officer. I wanted to make a great speech in defence, but they all brought me in guilty without waiting for it, and then they sat round the fire and squabbled about the sentence, while I stood between the patrol-leaders. The little beasts thought of all the tortures they had ever heard of, and would like to see, until it was bed-time; and then it was decided that I should have my head smacked by the Scoutmaster. So he stood up, and first he smote me friendly on the one cheek and then he smote me lovingly on the other, and the whole troop shouted: 'Do it again, sir,' and slapped one another's bare legs. I was jolly glad he didn't, for my cheeks tingled for ten minutes after. Instead, he gave me a bag of bulls'-eyes, so that my cheeks might be hot inside. He said it was a reward for a successful evening."

"Brown will want to do more than smack your head when he hears how you have had him."

"No doubt. He will have lots of time to swot up what he will do with me; but, lor' bless you, I shall be a sergeant before he is running round again. He's a very bad hat, is Brown, but a very simple fellow, really. The contempt he has for you, sir, amazed me. Would you like to hear some of the things he said about you this morning?"

"No, I shouldn't."

There was a knock at the door. Billy, without noise, disappeared.

"Wait a minute," I cried to the person outside. Then I opened the door like one who is just struggling into his coat. We had very nearly been caught together.

CHAPTER IV

2 P.M.—2.15 P.M.

CHARLIE STEEL entered my room as Billy left. He brought with him a letter from Mr. Treherne, and I asked him to sit down while I read it. The letter was as follows :

Dear Sir,

I have read the diary of the late Mrs. de Morville, and I think you might accept my assurance that there is nothing in it which could help you in discovering the murderer; but then, I am not aware of what evidence you possess. The diary is of an intimate character, such as no woman ought to have written, and every decent executor should immediately destroy. It would only cause distress and pain to those who have survived her, and Mrs. de Morville, though very reserved, was always most considerate where others were concerned. I understood the other evening that you would feel it your duty to obtain an order to inspect the volume. If you do so, it would be impossible to conceal the diary from Miss Courtland, so I am ready to allow you to read it, if you will come to The Elms this evening. Having done so, I hope, with your approval, it may be destroyed, and that no one but ourselves will know that it ever existed.

I am, sir,

Yours very faithfully,

T. TREHERNE.

"Will you tell Mr. Treherne that I will call at The Elms at nine o'clock?"

"Certainly, but is it wrong for me to inquire what is up? Of course, I know that Mr. Treherne is Aunt Martha's executor; I also know that I am very young; but, after all, I do represent the family. With my people in India, there is no one else to do so."

"My dear Steel, you have my sympathy, but I am afraid I must refer you to Mr. Treherne. You see, I am, after all, only a detective. My business is to find out who murdered Mrs. de Morville and bring the criminal to justice. That is where my duty begins and ends. It would be most improper for me to interfere in matters which concern an executor and the rights of an ultimate heir."

"That is very formal and correct, Inspector, and I suppose I ought to consider myself snubbed. I only asked—well, because you haven't hitherto treated me like that. Mr. Treherne regards me as an infant."

"Mr. Treherne is a lawyer and, legally, you are an infant. I'm sorry, not because you are so young, but because you are not younger. Were you twelve, you would have no responsibility and no sense of responsibility; being, I should guess, nineteen, you have no responsibility, but a haunting sense that you ought to do something. I own it is a terrible position for you to be in, but murders have a way of leading to other complications."

"Does Mr. Treherne know about these, what do you call them—complications?"

"No, he doesn't, but Mr. Treherne is a wise old gentleman, and he will do what he can for you and the family. I want you to trust him."

"I don't think Aunt Clare trusts him much, though she is polite to him. He doesn't tell her any more than he tells me. He sits by himself in the workroom, smoking cigars all day, and at meals he looks so worried and is so quiet that I feel inclined to scream. Aunt Clare makes conversation for both of us. It only makes things worse. To hear her, you would think that all she would say on the day

of judgement would be: 'Did you notice how very red the sky was this morning?'"

"I think she is a very remarkable woman."

"Oh, I wish she was more like Aunt Martha. With her, you knew everything was all right."

So saying, the poor boy shook hands and left me. I was sorry for him, but what could I do?

CHAPTER V

2.15 P.M.—5 P.M.

CHARLIE having gone I went and changed my clothes. I don't fancy myself in funeral garments. The Brown episode I had come to regard as a side-show in which I was not particularly concerned; but I was rather curious to place him—to know exactly where he came into the murder story. In completing a jigsaw puzzle the figures in the background may be important. In a trial for murder, indirect evidence may affect the verdict.

About three o'clock I left the "Rose and Crown", and boldly entered the lodge-gates of the Manor, nodded to Mr. Gunton, and walked on. When I came to the front of the house, I paused to survey it carefully, and then, turning to the right, entered the flower-garden, on which the side-windows of the library faced. Here I ran into Sir Walter, and said:

"You see, I am taking advantage of your permission to look round."

"That's all right," he said, and then with a nod passed on. I walked to the end of the herbaceous border, and turned. Sir Walter had disappeared. I proceeded to the terrace by the side of the house, and was just approaching the curtained window of the library when a gardener's boy hove in sight, so I went and had a little talk with him about the weather and his work, and walked once more the length of the herbaceous border. The third time I approached the window nobody was in sight. However, I proceeded to the corner to see if anybody was coming. Sir Walter was just leaving the stables, and was evidently on his way back to the house. I went

quickly to the window and pushed. It made a horrid jarring noise as it opened inwards. I stepped inside and pulled down the blind. I found that there was nearly three feet between the window and the curtains. So, greatly daring, I pushed aside the curtains and fetched an inconspicuous chair. A man of my weight does not like to stand too long. Placing it so that I could see the room, I sat down and waited. It was ten minutes past four.

There is nothing so tedious as sitting on an upright chair in semi-darkness, but I have schooled myself to do such things, and I can be very quiet. I had to wait until nearly ten minutes to five before the door opened and Sir Walter came in. He sat down at once at his table, with his back to me, and began writing. It seemed that nothing could or would happen. Ten minutes ticked slowly away, and then the door opened once more, and Mr. Brown came in as quiet as a cat. He did not advance far into the room, and he did not quite close the door. Mr. Brown was pretty sure of his ground, but not quite positive about that strong, silent man who went on writing. Mr. Brown coughed discreetly, and Sir Walter looked up.

CHAPTER VI

5 P.M.—5.30 P.M.

“Do you want anything?” asked Sir Walter, without putting down his pen.

“Well, sir, I want to talk with you about the murder. My conscience is troubled.”

“Oh, if it is important, you can wait until I have finished my letter.”

Sir Walter turned deliberately to his work, wrote at least another page, addressed an envelope, and stuck it down. He then leaned back in his chair and asked:

“Now, what is it?”

“It is very difficult, sir, for me to express myself, but certain facts have come to my knowledge; and, sir—I cannot help having a conscience—I feel that they must be communicated to the police.”

“Certainly. You should go to them at once.”

“But, sir, they concern you.”

“Me? But how?”

“If, sir, you will have patience, I should like to put what I have to tell the police before you. I have very carefully thought out the story which I have to tell.”

“Then be brief. I am listening, but I have more letters to write before post-time.”

“Everyone in Aldersford knows that, should a missing certificate be found, you and your son would be deprived of the Manor and your title. Everyone also knows that the late Mrs. de Morville spent much of her time in reading parish registers, and made many discoveries. From her letter to you, read at

the inquest, she had apparently made one which was likely to cause you trouble. I have reason to believe that you knew beforehand that such a discovery was likely, for I happened to be in the shrubbery when you came out of The Elms on Sunday night, and I can swear that I heard you say: 'Why the dickens should that damned woman spoil *our* lives?' I may say that I am keeping company with the parlour-maid, and that accounts for my being on the premises. To go on. You left the Manor on Monday afternoon at about ten minutes after four. In my hearing you twice gave the Inspector on Tuesday the wrong time by a quarter of an hour; but even he was not, I think, impressed by your attempt to establish an alibi. There does not, so far as I know, appear to have been anyone else near The Elms between four-twenty and four-thirty when the murder was committed. In the evening of Monday, I went into the plantation opposite The Elms. There is a broken paling just opposite The Elms gate. I need not be ashamed to tell you that the lady I mentioned just now was in the habit of writing me letters and posting them through the palings. That accounts quite naturally for my being there. On Monday night I found someone had thrown over the palings Master Dick's rifle. It had been taken to pieces and wrapped up in Monday's *Times*. I am sorry to say, Sir Walter, that your copy of Monday's *Times* is missing. It seems, then, that you had access to the gun-room, had taken out Master Dick's rifle, shot the lady, and then wrapped the two parts of the rifle in newspaper, and pitched them over the palings into that thick plantation. I can't help thinking that these little facts, taken together, provide a strong case against you, sir, but my conscience would not allow me to go to the police without first telling you what I know."

"Quite so! And may I ask at what you value your conscience? You had better put a price on it."

"I am only a poor man, Sir Walter, but my conscience is not for sale."

"All right—then I think this interview may conclude. I want to finish my letters."

"I should like, before leaving you, Sir Walter, to point out how painful I feel my duty to be. How desirous I am to believe that you are innocent of this terrible crime. Even at this time I should be willing to accept an assurance from yourself that you were not guilty."

"Well, I am not guilty!"

"That takes a great weight from off my mind. I don't know yet whether my conscience will allow me not to tell my tale to the police. It would, of course, cost you a great deal of money to establish your innocence; and, however triumphant you were, I imagine the trial and the publicity would be very disagreeable. In sparing you all this, I don't feel, as a poor man, that I should be wrong in accepting a sum of money which would enable me to fulfil my ambition of emigrating to America."

"And the amount?"

"I did hear, sir, by chance on Monday evening your telling Colonel Sandon that you had just invested one thousand pounds in Buenos Ayres Bearer Bonds. It has struck me that such bonds would be a convenient method of payment. The Bank manager here might be a little suspicious if I presented a cheque for so large an amount. Besides, they are probably in your table-drawer, and it would be convenient for me to leave at once. After what has passed, I have no doubt that you will not wish me to stay."

"And what security should I have that you would not at a later date blackmail me?"

"I hope, sir, that you can trust my honour."

"No, I can't, you infernal scoundrel! And if you are not out of my house in five minutes I may quite possibly kill you. You are quite at liberty to go and tell your story to that Inspector—I should think he is fool enough to believe anything."

"No, he isn't!" said I, emerging from behind the curtains.

Sir Walter swung himself round in his chair, and looked at me.

"Ah," he said, "so it is a little prearranged drama."

"Hardly that," I replied. "I don't think Mr. Brown wanted a witness when attempting to extort blackmail."

"I wasn't," said Brown, edging towards the door.

"You had better open it," said I. "I think others want to come in."

Brown swung the door open to escape, and went plump into the arms of Superintendent Thomas. "Steady, my man," said that worthy. "There's no hurry, and I think Sir Walter would like a word of explanation."

"I should," said Sir Walter.

"I hope, sir, you will pardon this intrusion, but your front door was open, and nobody seemed about. It is my painful duty to arrest this man, Sharpe, alias Blount, alias Brown, for robbery. In conjunction with the Dolminster police, we have just arrested this man's wife coming out of The Elms with their plate; and in the car, by which they intended to escape, I think we shall find a great deal of your own plate, besides Lady Gerrans's jewels. If, Sir Walter, you do not prosecute, the police will."

"How did you get on to this, Superintendent?"

"Well, I won't say that Inspector Frost did not give me a hint."

"But the following of it up is due to the marked ability of the Superintendents, here and at Dolminster," said I.

"That's very handsomely said," quoth the Super.

Sir Walter at this point rang the bell on his table. William, the young footman, appeared, and, seeing the police, looked scared.

"Brown," said Sir Walter, "is going away with

these gentlemen; will you see that my things are put out for dinner?"

Two constables who had arrived with the Super had seized Brown, though he was far too dazed to do anything. He only kept muttering to himself: "Anyhow, he'll swing for it."

CHAPTER VII

5.30 P.M.—6 P.M.

SIR WALTER had shown throughout the interview the same coolness which had enabled him to extricate himself from more than one tight corner on more than one continent; but he was nearly sixty, and I, at any rate, was aware that he felt the strain. As the door closed on the Super and his prisoner, he turned to me and said:

"Well, Inspector, I suppose you were hidden behind that curtain all the time. You heard what that fellow said. It sounded to me like a damning indictment. Are you going to arrest me for the murder of Mrs. de Morville?"

"No, sir. I am not altogether the fool you have taken me to be."

"Inspector, I apologize. I begin to think I may have misjudged you."

"Thank you. I don't mind telling you that I know who did shoot Mrs. de Morville. I don't mind telling you also that I have carefully investigated all the points raised by Brown, and know how they can be refuted. That is, all but one. The words you were accused of muttering in The Elms drive were new to me. Are they correct?"

"I don't know. A man who lives as much alone as I do may sometimes express his thoughts aloud. In fact, I have caught myself doing so once or twice."

"If you will forgive the impertinence, I should say no one ought to live alone. In your case I should say it was bad for you and bad for the boy."

"For the boy! What's the matter with the boy?"

"Nothing at present—but instead of lapsing into a habit of talking to yourself, wouldn't it be a good thing if you talked to him? He admires you intensely, but you have never won his confidence."

"Do you mean that the boy is afraid of me?"

"He's not afraid of a licking, if that's what you mean. I should say he does not understand you, and would never think of telling you about himself, or of owning up to his various misdemeanours."

"Do boys generally do so?"

"Perhaps not, but this boy has no mother; and you are a lonely man."

Just at that moment the door opened, and Dick looked in. His face reflected his excitement. He began: "What has happened?" and then, seeing me, he turned to go out again.

"May he come in?" I asked. "I have some serious questions to ask him."

"Certainly," said Sir Walter, and the boy came in. He looked a little rebellious and as if he were on the defensive. I began:

"I did not want to get you into any more trouble. I don't think I shall, but there are one or two points about which I want to be clear. First of all, I want to know what prank you have played on Brown?"

The boy crimsoned and looked at his father. His lips were slightly pouted, and he said nothing.

"It was probably last week," I suggested. "It was before you had that row with the gardener at The Elms."

"I think, Dick, you had better tell the Inspector," said his father.

"It was last week," said Dick, glaring at me. "There were two people whispering on the terrace just outside my bedroom window—I think they were kissing—and—and I fetched a jug of water and poured it over them. I didn't know one of them was Brown. I thought it was William and one of the maids. I suppose it was Brown, and didn't he swear!"

"Wouldn't it have been better if you had told Sir Walter?"

"Nonsense, Inspector, that isn't the sort of thing any boy would tell his father."

"Besides," said the ingenuous Dick, "it was at least two hours after I was supposed to be in bed."

"Now, it may surprise you to hear that Mrs. de Morville was almost certainly shot with your rifle. It may also surprise you to hear that both the gardener at The Elms and your butler suggested that you had done it."

"That's the sort of dirty game chaps like that would be up to," said Dick with indifference.

"But what would your father have said had I arrested you?"

"You wouldn't have been so silly as to believe them."

"I shouldn't, you are right there. But now we come to something more serious. Last Saturday you went to the Old Mill with your father, and you remained in the room with the grandfather-clock while your father went to look at the pigsty. Besides drinking ginger-beer, what did you do?"

"I put the clock back a quarter of an hour. They were so jolly proud of its never losing a minute."

"Later, you saw your father set his own watch by the clock that was a quarter of an hour wrong. Did you ever tell him?"

"No," said Dick, and this time he looked guiltily at his father.

"Now, do you know that on Tuesday afternoon, your father twice gave me what I knew was the wrong time? Do you know that on Monday afternoon he gave the wrong time to Colonel Sandon? And do you know that his insistence on the wrong time created in my mind, and in the mind of someone else, a suspicion that your father was attempting to establish a false alibi, and that he was really on the spot when Mrs. de Morville was killed? It is mistakes of this sort that get people hanged."

The boy listened to me with wide-open eyes. He

suddenly broke down, and threw himself into his father's arms, sobbing: "I didn't mean it."

"Be merciful," said Sir Walter. "He's all I have in the world."

"Just so, Sir Walter—and if you want to keep him, you must teach him to confide in you. I think he's worth it."

As I left the room it was not only the boy, but the strong, silent man who was sobbing. He held the boy very close to him in his arms.

CHAPTER VIII

6 P.M.—7 P.M.

FROM the Manor I went to the Police Station, and was at once admitted to the cell where Brown was confined. He showed his teeth to me like a snarling dog, and said :

"Whatever they say, I've got to thank you for this. I don't know how you came to be behind that curtain. It was a plant, sure enough. But you heard all I said, and you know now who did in the old woman. If I go to quod, the Squire, blast him, will swing."

"You are quite wrong, Mr. Brown."

"Oh, am I? We shall see. Do you think I am going to hold my tongue, however much he pays you?"

"Yes, I think you are going to hold your tongue. You won't get a short sentence, as it is; but, if you are charged with blackmail at the same time, and bring a palpably false accusation, you will spend a good many years on Dartmoor."

"It isn't false. You know that all right. You don't kid me any more."

"But I think you may as well listen. First, you have made some bad mistakes. By your own account you lied about where you found the rifle on Tuesday afternoon. Sir Walter, his son, and myself are witnesses to that. You had not then thought of blackmailing the Squire, you only wanted to get a bit of your own back because of that jug of water."

"Oh, you know that, do you?"

"Secondly, you made a mistake by trying to improve on your evidence. It was a mistake to burn

Sir Walter's Monday *Times* this morning, and then to lose the first sheet with his name on it, which was so definitely to incriminate him."

"How in hell do you know that?"

"Detective Smith found that out, and brought me that front sheet—the nice young man whom you showed over the Manor this morning is Detective Smith."

"And to think that Old Gunton sent me a message — 'The other 'tec's coming' — and I never guessed."

"Mr. Gunton is a shrewd old gentleman, but I don't think, Brown, that you have the brains to be a successful criminal. We will go on to your third mistake. You knew that Sir Walter was giving me the wrong time on Tuesday, but you did not do as I did. I found out at once that Sir Walter's watch was really wrong, and I have since discovered how it came to be wrong. If necessary, the evidence will be given and will prove convincing."

"Fourthly, I know, and you do not, who threw the rifle over the palings, and at what time. I have in my possession another outside sheet of the *Times*, and another name is scribbled upon it."

"Fifthly, you think you know to whom Sir Walter was referring when he spoke of 'a damned woman' and 'our lives'. I believe you are mistaken, but this, I confess, I have not yet proved. I'm honest, you see."

"Lastly, you have been fooled by that Lawyer Davies over the chance of discovering that missing certificate, but I have read the reports of the trial in 1810. So has Sir Walter. He knows what I do, that he has nothing to fear. Don't you know yet what discovery Mrs. de Morville had made? Well, I will tell you. She had discovered that you were a thief. A friend in Dolminster sent her as a present a little cream jug with the Gerranses arms engraved on it last Friday. She went into Dolminster to make inquiries on Saturday. She had her suspicions confirmed by letter on Monday afternoon. You would

have been locked up three days earlier if Mrs. de Morville had not been shot.

"If I were you, I should think over the points I have mentioned, and consider if it is worth while to make the charge. I can assure you that if anyone swings for the murder, it will not be Sir Walter Gerrans."

"You're a devil," said Mr. Brown.

"That's all I get for giving you good advice."

CHAPTER IX

7 P.M.—7.30 P.M.

COMING from the Police Station to the "Rose and Crown", I ran into Old Gunton.

"Off to the tap-room?"

"Aye! There'll be some talk there to-night."

"Are you going to tell them how you tried to save Mr. Brown from prison?"

"I didn't—Brown ain't nothing to me."

"But you sent him two messages to beware of 'tecs."

"I wasn't suspicious like of him. He belonged to the Manor."

"What made you suspect me and the young man?"

"Because you were policemen and pretending you weren't."

"I told you that I was Inspector Frost of the Criminal Investigation Department."

"But, Lord bless you, you didn't think I should believe you were all that."

"But that's what I am."

"Maybe it's a London way of speaking, but I belong to the Manor. I've belonged to it man and boy all my life. I never did hear tell of such a thing as of policemen going to the Manor, as if the Squire was just a common man. It ain't natural."

"Well, we've saved Sir Walter from being robbed by Brown."

"Maybe! After all, Brown, he came from London, too."

CHAPTER X

"THE nice young gentleman had to go away this afternoon," said the landlady, "so his room is vacant, if you would like to change."

"No, thank you, for I shall have to leave to-morrow."

"But you haven't done nothing yet, and you have not discovered the murderer."

"Yes, I have. Don't you make any mistake."

"How could you? Why, you've only walked round and talked to people."

"That's how I do it. I have one or two people to talk to yet."

"Well, there's the parlourmaid from The Elms upstairs waiting for you. She may want to talk to you, but never a word would she say to me. She wasn't friendly, and she looked that wild that she fairly frightened me, so I said: 'Now, Miss Nokes, you go straight upstairs, and sit quiet in the gentleman's chair till he comes. He's a funny gentleman, by all accounts, but a child in arms need not be afraid of him'."

I went upstairs and opened my door. There was Harriet, but she was not sitting quietly in my chair. She was apparently walking to and fro. She looked distracted, and all the acidity seemed purged out of her. For the first time, I pitied Harriet.

"Oh, sir," she cried as I closed the door. "He didn't do it. I am certain he couldn't do it."

"Do you mean William Brown?" I asked. "And what couldn't he have done?"

"He didn't kill Mrs. de Morville. Why should he, that's what I want to know?"

"Of course he didn't. Who says he did?"

Harriet gave a gasp, and then sat down and gaped at me. There was a short silence, then she said:

"But what is it, then? Mr. Barnard stopped his van as I was coming back from Badenhams and told me."

"Told you what?"

"Told me that William had been taken to the Station. So I came straight on here."

"You have not been to The Elms yet?"

"No. It was like this," and Harriet began to sniff. "William wanted to know my brother, and he wanted me to know his sister. His sister is most respectable—she has a motor-car. And it was all arranged so beautiful. His sister was coming from Dolminster in her car, and was to drive him to Badenhams; and I was to meet them there, and we were all to have tea at 'The Cross', and he promised to drive me back."

"But Friday is not your day out."

"No, but Elsie did not want to go home this week. She had her reasons. It all seemed so right, and everything so quiet at The Elms after the funeral."

"Why did you not wait to go out with them in the car?" Harriet hesitated for a minute, and then confessed.

"I wanted to go to Badenhams first to see that all was right. My brother's wife—she never was in good service—she doesn't know how things should be done, and I didn't want my brother to be shamed by her."

"I see. Then William Brown didn't come? Do you know he never meant to do so?"

Harriet, who had gradually become calmer, looked up. She was frightened again, and asked:

"What do you mean?"

"Brown wanted to get you out of the way, that was all. Now, Miss Nokes, I am afraid it is going to be a dreadful shock to you, but I had better tell

you—Brown was a bad man, and his wife was arrested this afternoon coming out of The Elms with all the plate.”

“His wife!” said Harriet.

“Yes, I think she is his wife. They had also robbed the Manor, and they are both now locked up. Everything was packed in the motor-car, but they weren’t going to Badenharn.”

“But he was going to marry me,” said Harriet in a puzzled way. She was finding it very hard to take things in.

“What was the letter you took out of Mrs. de Morville’s bag on Monday afternoon?”

Harriet started, and said: “What has that to do with it?”

“Give it to me,” I said, “and perhaps I can explain.”

With a trembling hand she produced a crumpled note, and put it into my hand. She was staring at me like one who does not comprehend. Here is the letter:

Dear Martha,

I have been to Manton’s. He has two other pieces of silver with the Gerranses arms. He bought them from a lady who is staying at a boarding-house in Dolminster. I think you ought to let Sir Walter know at once. I did not like the look of that new butler when I called at the Manor ten days ago. If I can do anything else, let me know. Of course, I warned them at Manton’s to do nothing until they heard from you or Sir Walter.

Yours affectionately,

SUSAN ACKROYD.

“Why did you keep that letter?”

“I didn’t like the bit about William.”

“Didn’t you ask him about it when he came to see you last night?”

Harriet was past being surprised that I knew about this. In flat tones she replied:

"Of course I did. He said that Mrs. Ackroyd was a mischief-making old cat—and I knew that was right, it is just what she is. William said he had sized her up when he said 'Not at home' the other afternoon. She was that anxious to get into the Manor."

"It never occurred to you that he was stealing the Gerranses plate and selling it in Dolminster?"

"I won't believe it. William never did such a thing."

"I am sorry, Miss Nokes, very sorry for you; but when you get back to The Elms, you will find your plate gone. It is now at the Police Station, quite safe, and so are William Brown and his wife."

Harriet gave me a glance of bewilderment, and without saying another word went out of the room. On the stairs was the landlady waiting for her. "Well, my dear?" said that motherly person.

"I won't believe it," said Harriet, pushing past her. She went out.

CHAPTER XI

9 P.M.—9.15 P.M.

AT nine o'clock I rang the bell at The Elms, and Cook opened the door.

"What! You, Cook?"

"Yes, me. There's Harriet upstairs having hysterics, poor thing. I've told her it's no good carrying on like that; and there's that Elsie so scared that she daren't come. There's only me left."

"I want to see Mr. Treherne."

"He and Master Charlie have gone down to the Station to see about the plate. The Super sent for them. He wants to write more things in that note-book of his. Mr. Treherne said he hoped to be back in time; and if he wasn't—I guessed he couldn't be, if he had to do with that Super—if he wasn't, would you wait?"

She showed me into the workroom, which by now had the scent of much tobacco smoke, and I sat down in a chair.

"I am very sorry for Miss Nokes," I said.

"So am I, but what did she want to take up with a stranger for? She didn't know nought about him; and then to keep it so dark. Why, even I didn't know. It's all very well to keep yourself to yourself, as the saying is, but I don't hold with people having their victuals with you regular and never telling you nothing."

"I am sure, Miss Goodman, you'll never take up with a stranger."

"You may be sure of that. I'm going to marry a tidy man I've known all my life, who has a tidy

home—leastways, it will be tidy when I've been round it a bit."

"I congratulate you."

"By rights, it isn't settled yet, but I've made up my mind. It's a duty like, and I've always done my duty. Men are poor, feckless things when they are left alone. That's how it is, whatever folks say."

"I am sure you will be very happy."

"So he ought to be if I have the doing for him. He's a bit slow at present. Poor man! He wants to say: 'Will you marry me?' and somehow he can't get it out. I expect I shall have to help him, after all—but before the mistress died I wasn't in any hurry. I hadn't made up my mind then."

At this point the front door opened, and cook hastily withdrew. A minute afterwards Mr. Treherne entered the room with apologies for keeping me waiting.

CHAPTER XII

9.15 P.M.—11 P.M.

"ONE thing seems to follow another. There seems to be no end to the troubles of this house. I have never known anything like it," said Mr. Treherne.

"I am very sorry for you, sir, and Mr. Steel."

"And for Miss Courtland, also. After all, it's worst of all for her. It's my business to deal with people's troubles; and as for the boy, he will forget all about it the first pretty face he sees. It's a great thing to be young!"

"You have the diary?"

"Yes. I wish you did not have to read it. Nobody ought to want to read these sort of things. To read a diary like this is almost indecent. Good Lord! I hope my wife doesn't keep one. Mrs. de Morville was a very good woman. You'll see that by the diary. It's surprising what a lot of pain a good woman may cause. I shiver when I think of poor Miss Courtland reading that diary, and of how she would feel if she knew that outsiders like you and me knew what was in it."

"I am so much an outsider that I really don't count. You see, I have to see it, for I am bound to neglect no evidence which may throw light on the murder."

"Exactly!" said Mr. Treherne. "Don't think, Inspector, that I am blaming you. You have your duty to perform, just as I have. If I hadn't been a lawyer, I should have burnt the book and denied it ever existed. Perhaps it would have been better—but you can't help your training. I couldn't do it—so here it is."

He put into my hand a strongly-bound volume, secured by clasps. Within were pages and pages of Mrs. de Morville's neat handwriting. It was in this book she had written many things: doubts, difficulties, aspirations, prayers. She had found in this book an outlet—the shy, reserved woman who found it so impossible to reveal herself to her fellows.

There was, as might be expected, a great deal about Charlie Steel—little stories about him, his remarks, his failings, and his good deeds. There was much more to his credit than to his discredit; but the diary showed how anxiously he had been watched, and with what abounding love his progress had been followed. There was just a note of pathos here and there. After describing how she had discovered and paid his debts, she wrote: "He has been a silly boy, and I have given him a good scolding. He did not try to excuse himself, and I think he is a little ashamed. I suppose he looks on me as a bad-tempered old woman, who won't even pay his little bills without a long lecture. I know he trusts me, but I don't suppose he loves me; and yet I can thank God every day for all the happiness he has given me these last twelve years. And he will never know it."

In bringing up Charlie it was evident that she had always been haunted by the memory of the dearly-beloved brother who had been such a failure. The crash had apparently come after her marriage to Mr. de Morville, and her references to her father showed marked restraint. She wrote out the story of George Stevens as it has been told in these pages. The facts were a surprise to her. All she had known was from her sister Clare, who had written from Paris to announce her brother's death, and to say that, poor as she was, she had paid for the funeral. The richer Mrs. de Morville had at once refunded the money. She quite recognized how hard it was for poor Clare to manage on £500 a year.

There were many other passages of interest, but I had to concentrate on all that was told about Clare

Courtland, and I soon rose and went to the table that I might make extracts.

"Is it necessary?" asked Mr. Treherne nervously. He had been sitting opposite to me all the time, watching me attentively, and puffing out clouds of smoke whenever I deliberately looked up.

"Certainly," I said. "My Chief will have to consider them."

"It can't be helped," he said, and shrugged his shoulders.

Sitting at the table, I copied out the following passages :

"April 3rd: I am becoming very anxious about Clare. She is evidently infatuated with Sir Walter, and is always talking about him. It is quite silly the way that she has of reporting how she has met him in the road, and how he looked when he said 'Good morning' to her. I do hope this will not bring more unhappiness. I shall never forget the scene when my engagement was announced. Up to that time she had always imagined that John meant to propose to her. All through my married life she refused to visit me, and it was only after my great loss that we were reconciled. I never did understand the grounds of that misunderstanding. . . .

"April 15th: I am getting still more anxious about Clare, especially as I am certain that Sir Walter does not in the least care for her. I have proposed that we should go to the Italian lakes for a change. We have not really had a holiday since the War. Clare said she was quite ready to go, and that she was at all times ready to sacrifice her own chances of happiness for me. What am I to do? . . .

"May 12th: Sir Walter proposed to me in the Manor garden this afternoon, and I refused him. I was so sorry for him. He is lonely—far more lonely

than I am, and he feels the need that Dicky has of being mothered. I hope that Clare will never hear of this. We might, I think, have been very happy, but my first duty is to Clare. . . .

"May 24th: Sir Walter sent Clare a book she had asked him to lend her this morning, with a polite but very brief note. Clare insists on regarding this as almost tantamount to a proposal. It is an awful delusion, but when I said that I did not see how he could have refused her request, she only said: 'My dear, you have forgotten the days of your courtship. They were so very long ago. You will, I know, try to be sympathetic with the great happiness that has come to me.' . . .

"June 16th: I was surprised and shocked to-day to find out how actively Sir Walter dislikes Clare. He called at tea-time, but refused to come in when he heard Clare was alone. He met me afterwards in Aldersford, and told me that he had called. I said: 'Surely Clare gave you tea?' He replied: 'No, I did not go in. I am sorry, but I don't like your sister.' How will it end? . . .

"June 30th: Clare has been very upset for two or three days. Sir Walter's cousin, Mrs. Fitzsimmonds, and her sister, Lady Rotherham, have been staying at the Manor. Lady Rotherham was not very civil to poor Clare, but then, Lady Rotherham is never very civil to anyone. Clare is certain that there is a family conspiracy to prevent Sir Walter's marrying again. . . .

"July 28th: Sir Walter has been away from the Manor for a fortnight, and I miss him dreadfully. Somehow or other, it is pleasant to know he is at hand, and pleasant to look forward to a little rational conversation. He was telling me just before he went away what interesting ramifications there were in the

Denton pedigree. Denton does not know it yet, but Sir Walter has established his claim to a royal descent. The Dentons have had their ups and downs, but they have been in Blankshire at least 800 years. From royalty to a shop, from baronial England to a nation of shop-keepers—such, I suppose, is an epitome of the history of England. I have a good many entries about the Dentons which I cannot place until Sir Walter returns. Clare, I am thankful to say, has not referred to him lately. I hope her infatuation is on the wane.

“August 5th: Several people in Aldersford have told me what a naughty little boy Dicky Gerrans is. I can't believe it. He looks so very, very good, and has such charming manners.

“August 12th: I had a long talk with Sir Walter to-day about Dicky. I am sure Sir Walter does not understand him in the least. I told him so. He said: ‘I wish you would come and look after him.’ It was rather awkward. It makes it impossible for me to speak of the matter again.

“September 1st: Clare is just as bad again. She goes for walks in the hope of intercepting Sir Walter. People are beginning to talk about how often they seem to meet. It is most unpleasant for him.

“September 18th: My birthday. I am fifty-five. . . . My duty still remains to look after Clare, to make a home for her, and to try to save her from herself. She looks so placid and self-assured, she seems so accommodating, but she never rests and never deviates from anything on which she has set her heart.

“September 19th: When I went in to say good night just now, Clare was sitting by her dressing-table nursing such a pretty little rifle, with a broken

packet of cartridges beside her. She explained that it was Dicky's, and that he had left it by the river, careless little boy! I asked her why she had not sent it up to the Manor, and she replied that as Stevens had driven me to Dolminster there was no one to send. I suggested it would be kind if she returned it to the boy without letting Sir Walter know of his carelessness. She said: 'Oh, he won't want it to-morrow, it's Sunday. It will be all right.' Then, just before I was leaving the room, she pointed it at me, and said: 'Do you remember our Rifle Club days? I should like to shoot again.'

"September 20th: Sir Walter called in the evening. He talked genealogies hard until Clare went to bed. It is too bad of him to select a topic in which she cannot join. After Clare had gone to bed, he proposed to me again. It was rather weak of me, but I had to explain to him quite clearly that I could not desert my sister. He became quite angry, and said most unjustifiable things about her. As he went out, I was almost certain someone was in the hall, and I thought I heard the baize door shut. It gave me quite a fright, and I went round to the back to see if all was right, and everything locked up. After finding a man in the kitchen last Saturday, one has become suspicious of what may be going on."

That was the last entry. To find the extracts and to copy them had taken some time. It was past eleven when I had done. Then I handed the book back to Mr. Treherne, and said: "I am sorry to say this book must not be destroyed."

"But surely it has no bearing on your inquiry?" he said.

"It has proved my case, and provided a motive. By careful inquiries I have limited the number of people who can have been on the spot between four-twenty and four-thirty on Monday afternoon. I can account for what everyone was doing except one.

There is only one who can have opened that window in the box-room, and there is only one who had the rifle, from the time when Dick Gerrans lost it until the time when Brown found it thrown into the plantation. I can produce a witness as to when it was thrown. I have the outside sheet of *The Times* which was left in the box-room with Mrs. de Morville's name on it, when the rest was used to wrap up the rifle which had been taken to pieces. My evidence is from many sources, and is complete. All I required was evidence of a motive. That, I think, can be inferred from the diary."

Mr. Treherne was trembling. His face had gone white.

"You—you don't mean to say you suspect—?" He stopped, his lips refused to pronounce the name.

"I don't suspect, Mr. Treherne—I know."

"But this is too terrible. What is to be done?"

"You and I, Mr. Treherne, have to do our duty. We may charitably believe that she is mad, and we know that God is merciful."

With a tottering step, he opened the door for me.

The hall was in darkness, and presumably everyone had gone to bed; but I don't think my ear was at fault in hearing the drawing-room door opposite being closed. Had Miss Courtland been listening to me as she had listened last Sunday night to Sir Walter?

SATURDAY MORNING

I HAD not been long up when the landlady came into my room in a very excited state of mind. She came to tell me that Miss Courtland had committed suicide. The news was true. Harriet, on coming down at six o'clock, had found her mistress dead in an arm-chair of the workroom. A bottle of veronal

nearly empty was on the table, and the covers of a book that had been torn up were on the floor. The charred remains of Mrs. de Morville's diary were in the grate. On a sheet of paper she had written these words :

I shot my sister—I am mad. In proof of this I leave everything of which I die possessed to Inspector Frost. It may compensate him for not seeing me hanged.

THE END

